

Practice, a Novel;
and
Discipline Your Darlings:
Writerly Discipline in Freud, Foucault,
and the Discourses of Creative Writing

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Abstract

This thesis explores, in both creative and critical modes, the concept of discipline and its relationships to desire, attention, creativity and writing. The creative component, a novel entitled *Practice*, follows its protagonist, Annabel, through a day in the strictly routinised life she has designed to maximise her own immersion in her undergraduate work. As she reads, walks, and fantasises, the various threads of her thinking—her work on Shakespeare’s sonnets, her relationship with her older boyfriend Rich, and her own private story about two invented characters—begin to tangle together in a contrapuntal meditation on obsession, distraction, and eroticism. The critical component identifies and examines the contemporary cultural fascination with ‘writerly discipline’, the expectation that writers must consciously design and regulate their own working practices to produce good work. I begin with a theoretical introduction to discipline, demonstrating that it is conceptually unstable and depends on its underlying ‘doctrine’ for its ideological significance. My first chapter then analyses a corpus of recent Anglo-American texts which speak to the theme of writerly discipline; these sources place discipline in ambivalent interrelation with an assumed innate personal creativity which is supposed to be necessary for creative writing but also to require constant management. My second chapter, picking up on Freudian themes in my corpus of modern sources, explores Freud’s own discussions of self-discipline and creative writing, demonstrating that they are liable to some of the same contradictions and ambivalences as more recent discourses. In my final chapter I use the work of Michel Foucault to extend my critique of discourses of writerly discipline, concluding that—as Foucault suggests of sexuality—creativity may well be conceptually constituted, rather than ‘discovered’, by discourses about how to access and manage it.

The creative component of this thesis has been omitted from the publicly available version.

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CREATIVE COMPONENT [OMITTED]

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No part of this thesis has previously been submitted by me or anyone else
for a degree in this or any other university. The entirety of this thesis is
solely my own work and has not been produced in collaboration with any
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Introduction to the Project

When the first UK coronavirus lockdown was imposed in March 2020, and many people found themselves suddenly working from home for the first time, the internet was flooded with articles giving advice about home working: how to structure your day, how to distinguish clearly between work and leisure time, and how to maintain your physical health despite being mostly confined to your home.¹ For creative writers and researchers in the humanities—and I was both—this advice was sometimes helpful, but mostly old hat. Anyone working on a large project with no set hours, a distant or undefined deadline, and (in some cases) no designated office space must find strategies to keep up their motivation and productivity over months or years—to maintain, in other words, their self-discipline in the absence of other motivating factors.

For this reason and others, I had been interested in self-discipline for several years before the pandemic began. Upon starting a Creative Writing MA in 2014, and working freelance alongside it, I was suddenly blessed with a large amount of unstructured time to organise how I liked, and had to determine what working conditions would help me produce my best work. On top of this, a crisis in my personal circumstances meant I had to pay much more attention to cultivating my own powers of self-discipline: I started practising meditation, reduced my use of social media, and began abstaining from other, more serious addictive behaviours. This has been an ongoing project, and one in which it is easy to lose perspective about how much self-

¹ See, for instance: “7 Simple Tips to Tackle Working from Home,” NHS, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/coronavirus/simple-tips-to-tackle-working-from-home/>; Bryan Lufkin, “Coronavirus: How to Work from Home, the Right Way,” BBC, March 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200312-coronavirus-covid-19-update-work-from-home-in-a-pandemic>; Eleanor Lawrie and Sara Parry, “Coronavirus: Five Ways to Work Well from Home,” BBC, March 17, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51868894>; Natalie Hardwick, “Top 10 Tips for Working from Home,” BBC Good Food, accessed February 18, 2022, <https://www.bbcbgoodfood.com/howto/guide/top-tips-working-home>; “Working From Home: A Wellness Action Plan,” Mind, accessed February 18, 2022, https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/6020/22078_work-from-home-wap.pdf; Kim Mok and Gabriel Manga, “Working from Home? 4 Tips for Staying Productive,” Think with Google, March 2020, <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/en-gb/future-of-marketing/management-and-culture/work-from-home-tips/>; Selma Furtado, “Tips on Working from Home during Covid-19,” Ambition, March 2020, <https://www.ambition.co.uk/blog/2020/03/tips-on-working-from-home-during-covid-19>.

discipline is ‘normal’ or desirable: discipline, as this project will make clear, is always in danger of slipping into the indiscipline of obsession or compulsion. This instability is compounded by how different discipline can look from the inside or outside: although friends and family have often commented on my high levels of self-discipline, I experience my own mind as highly distractible and chaotic, always liable to rush after a dopamine fix instead of resting steadily on the task at hand. Nor, indeed, is perfect discipline necessarily my ambition. W.H. Auden asserted that “A modern stoic knows that the surest way to discipline passion is to discipline time: decide what you want or ought to do during the day, then always do it at exactly the same moment every day, and passion will give you no trouble.”² Whether or not this accurately reflected Auden’s actual experience, it is certainly a far cry not only from my own lifestyle but also from my own wishes: I have no interest in the colourlessness of a life entirely untroubled by passion. At the forefront of this project’s concerns, therefore, will be what is ‘edited out’—literally, in some cases—by practices of discipline.

Developing the project

This PhD in fact began with a focus not on discipline, but on the form of the novella. I had observed, and was uneasy about, the way in which literary commentators repeatedly tried to identify ‘essential’ qualities of the novella as a form (rather than, say, defining it quantitatively by its word count), and often based their admiration for the novella on its efficiency or ‘leanness’: for instance, in Lindsey Drager’s words, “[The novella] is not an unwieldy short story but cohesive, taut, succinct. It is the novel’s architectural foundation, the stripped and fleshless core that argues the frame of a story might be enough.”³ Ian McEwan, in an article for *The New Yorker*, articulates a similar comparison between the novella and the novel in more graphic, troublingly gendered terms: “I believe the novella is the perfect form of prose fiction. It is the beautiful daughter of a rambling, bloated, ill-shaven giant (but a giant who’s a genius

² Quoted in Mason Currey, *Daily Rituals: How Great Minds Make Time, Find Inspiration, and Get to Work*, Kindle (London: Pan Macmillan, 2013), 3.

³ Lindsey Drager, “The Novella Is Not The Novel’s Daughter: An Argument in Notes,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, October 23, 2015, <http://www.michiganquarterlyreview.com/2015/10/the-novella-is-not-the-novels-daughter-an-argument-in-notes-2/>.

on his best days)”.⁴ McEwan goes on to suggest that the novella requires the writer to exercise particularly strong moral virtue, as well as technical facility, since, in order to avoid the “quintuple subplots and swollen midsections” of the novel, they must “polish their sentences to precision and clarity”; the novella, he says, “lays on the writer a *duty* of unity and the pursuit of perfection” (my emphasis).

I found what I considered to be worrying echoes of McEwan’s views in many other discussions of the novella since the mid-twentieth century, and identified two key qualities regularly attributed to the novella which I considered conceptually problematic: *discipline* and *intensity*.⁵ Both these qualities seem to assume a notional alternative version of a text, usually a novel of more conventional length, which has been shortened and condensed to produce the novella—or, perhaps, assume a hierarchy of the various (artificially separated) components of prose fiction among

⁴ Ian McEwan, “Some Notes on the Novella,” *The New Yorker*, October 29, 2012, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/some-notes-on-the-novella#entry-more>.

⁵ My two key terms arose from a literature review of Anglo-American discussions of the novella (and adjacent forms like the novelette, nouvelle, and short novel) throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. See, for instance: Bayard Quincy Morgan, “The Novelette as a Literary Form,” *Symposium* 1, no. 1 (1946): 34–39; Howard Nemerov, “Composition and Fate in the Short Novel,” in *Poetry and Fiction: Essays* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 229–45; Ronald Paulson, “Introduction,” in *The Novelette Before 1900*, ed. Ronald Paulson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), v–viii; Gerald Gillespie, “Novella, Nouvelle, Novella, Short Novel? - A Review of Terms,” *Neophilologus* 51, no. 1 (1967): 117–27 and 225–30; Georg Lukács, *Solzhenitsyn*, trans. William David Graf (London: Merlin Press, 1970); Judith Leibowitz, *Narrative Purpose in the Novella* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1974); Mary Doyle Springer, *Forms of the Modern Novella* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1975); Graham Good, “Notes on the Novella,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 10, no. 3 (1977): 197–211; Stephen King, “Afterword,” in *Different Seasons* (London: Warner Books, 1982), 552–60; Con Coroneos, “The Modern Novella: James, Conrad, Lawrence” (University of Oxford, 1985); A. Robert Lee, ed., *The Modern American Novella* (Plymouth: Vision Press, 1989); Tony Whedon, “Notes on the Novella,” *Southwest Review* 96, no. 4 (2011): 565–71; Joy Castro, “On Length in Literature,” *Brevity: A Journal of Concise Literary Nonfiction*, September 17, 2012, <http://brevitymag.com/craft-essays/on-length-in-literature/>; Joe Fassler, “The Return of the Novella, the Original #Longread,” *The Atlantic*, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/the-return-of-the-novella-the-original-longread/256290/>; Robert Graham, “To Cut a Long Story Short,” March 10, 2014, <https://mmunovellaaward.wordpress.com/2014/03/10/to-cut-a-long-story-short/>; Holly Williams, “Small Is Beautiful: From Jane Austen to George RR Martin, the Novella Is Making a Come-Back,” *The Independent*, July 7, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/small-is-beautiful-from-jane-austen-to-george-rr-martin-the-novella-is-making-a-come-back-a7124541.html>; Jacqueline Kolosov, “Contributors on Craft: Jacqueline Kolosov on the Novella,” *The Missouri Review*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.missourireview.com/contributors-on-craft-jacqueline-kolosov-on-the-novella/>; Jack Smith, “The Novella: Stepping Stone to Success or Waste of Time?,” *The Writer*, October 4, 2017, <https://www.writermag.com/2017/10/04/novella/>; Dzanc Books, “The Novella as a Way Out: A Sanctioning, Perhaps a Call to Action,” Dzanc Books, March 3, 2017, <http://www.dzancbooks.org/blog/2017/3/3/countdowntopub-the-novella-as-a-way-out-a-sanctioning-perhaps-a-call-to-action>; Mieke Ziervogel, “For the Love of Novellas Translated from German,” *Ozy*, November 14, 2017, <http://www.ozy.com/good-sht/for-the-love-of-novellas-translated-from-german/82045>; A.S. Patric and Elisa McTaggart, “How a Novella Could Set Your Story Free,” *Writers Victoria*, June 15, 2018, <https://writersvictoria.org.au/writing-life/on-writing/how-novella-could-set-your-story-free>.

which ‘action’ and ‘dialogue’ are considered essential, but ‘description’ or ‘reflection’ less so. By this principle, a prose narrative which contains only “the frame of a story” (Drager) might be considered simply a disciplined, intensified version of a longer novel. Both these assumptions seem not only faulty but also telling, implying as they do that aesthetic values are being invoked to justify covertly moral judgements of longer works of fiction as inherently ‘self-indulgent’.

I intended to write two novellas of around 30,000 words each, and a critical project which would first identify trends in the way the novella was discussed, then unpack discipline and intensity in turn, critique them as literary-aesthetic categories, and consider what ideological undercurrents they carried. While working to theorise discipline for the second chapter, however, I became increasingly drawn into the broader questions of why discipline in particular is considered so important to creative writing, what forms of discipline writers are expected or encouraged to perform, and what threat these practices are supposed to defend against. These questions dovetailed with my own interests in disciplining time and attention (which were also already present in my creative work), and they seemed important to address before I could return to the subject of the novella and its particular version of discipline. That I have remained with the subject of discipline, and eventually focused my whole project on it, is indicative of the knottiness of the theoretical problems discipline poses, and its resonances with other ‘big’ questions about what makes good literature.

A full conceptual introduction to discipline will be given in my critical project and will particularly demonstrate its structural instability and its conceptual ‘blankness’, its dependence on social norms and individual psychologies for judgments about what behaviours are disciplined or undisciplined. In the case of ‘writerly discipline’—my term for the specific practices exhorted by many discourses around creative writing—discipline is imagined to exist in a kind of fraught relationship with creativity, taking over when creativity falters or, conversely, when it becomes excessive. Discussions of this relationship, as I shall show, carry embedded ideologies about how ‘good’ (or ‘virtuous’) writing should be produced, and provide many examples of how discipline’s manifestations and interrelations can magnetise much wider debates in both ethics and aesthetics.

A critical *and* creative project, however, feels most appropriate for approaching discipline. Practising self-discipline, in particular, tends to involve a lot of interior dialogue between different parts of the psyche, and can be the site where fantasy bumps

up against reality—both of which are fruitful themes for prose fiction. The short novel I have written for this project (instead of two novellas) therefore focuses on these fraught, complex kinds of experience. As many of the writers I cite in my critical project have attested, what might look like a solid practice of discipline (such as many hours spent at the desk) can feel effortless or difficult, ecstatic or intolerable, even from one minute to the next—and the mind, of course, can rebel of its own accord, ranging far away from where it is supposed to be, even if the body is in the right place. Previous fiction I have written has often dealt with related issues like infatuation and solitude, and I return to these themes here, trying to draw out the way discipline can itself shade into obsessiveness, the fact that practising discipline is always a messy business at best.

The creative component: *Practice*

Wordsworth's 'sonnet on the sonnet' famously compares the sonnet form to, or figures it as, a "narrow room", a cell, a citadel, a bell-shaped foxglove flower, a prison, and a "scanty plot of ground": all images of physical limitation, even claustrophobia. Far from suggesting the pain of restriction, however, the poem's speaker insists that the occupants of all these spaces are perfectly content, and that, likewise, he has repeatedly found "brief solace" in the sonnet form, and relief from "the weight of too much liberty".⁶ Restraint, whether chosen or imposed, becomes transfigured in this poem into a kind of freedom from decision-making, a sense of safety and sanctuary.

This complex of restraint and relief, and the sonnet form itself, become central images in *Practice*. Annabel, the main character, sits in her undergraduate bedroom in Oxford—a re-literalised "narrow room"—and reads Shakespeare's Sonnets in preparation for writing an essay. My choice of a sonnet *sequence*, specifically, is deliberate, since many Early Modern sonnet sequences revolve around the speaker's love for an often unavailable beloved, and thus hold the wild indiscipline of obsession within a severely disciplined and repetitive form. Shakespeare's Sonnets express with particular potency what R.P. Blackmur calls "a poetics for infatuation" characterised

⁶ William Wordsworth, "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room," in *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 286.

by mutability: “The content of infatuate love, while one is in it, is of a violence uncontrollable and changeable by a caprice as deep as nature, like the weather.”⁷ Robert Smith’s psychoanalytic speculations about the sonnet, moreover, emphasise the push-pull between the private and public—a writer writes her own sonnet, but in a communal form—and link the obsessiveness of a sonnet sequence to Freudian ideas of repetition and ritual:

Obsessive actions are no doubt personal—they even serve to ratify the alleged particularity of a given psyche—but their repeatability lends them a formal element which simultaneously takes them beyond that psyche’s exclusive ownership. The more obsessive one becomes, the more idiosyncratic, but also the more formal, the more theatrical, the more imitable, the more public.⁸

Annabel, like a sonneteer, is idiosyncratic and intensely formalistic, obsessive and occasionally capricious. She is infatuated less with a particular person than with her own way of living, even approaching a Foucauldian self-aestheticisation (“There are now unsatisfactory ways of walking through to the bathroom”).⁹ She repeatedly imagines herself being watched, and turns descriptive phrases over in her head; even when these moments are not explicit, my use of a third-person present-tense narratorial voice enhances this sense of self-consciousness further, implying that Annabel is even positioning herself as the narrator of her own life, that she already sees her life as a work of literature.¹⁰ Conversely, when she forgets to narrate and becomes genuinely absorbed in her work or some other activity, the narrative ‘drops out’ and is given over to blank space. ‘True’ self-discipline here might be that which forgets its own

⁷ R.P. Blackmur, “A Poetics for Infatuation,” *The Kenyon Review* 23, no. 4 (1961): 655.

⁸ Robert Rowland Smith, *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 117.

⁹ Foucault asserts in a 1983 interview that, since there is no “true self”, “we have to create ourselves as a work of art.” See Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 351.

¹⁰ I have chosen this form of third-person narration over free indirect style, which as D.A. Miller points out, can result in an idealised disciplining narrator who alternately identifies with, then corrects and undermines, the character’s thoughts and opinions. Miller notes this tendency in a novel like *Middlemarch*; more recently, I have found it used to unsettling effect in Lena Andersson’s novel *Wilful Disregard* (2013), where the narrator adopts a clearly distinct, opinionated persona to criticise the protagonist, as it were, behind her back. See D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 25–26; Lena Andersson, *Wilful Disregard: A Novel About Love*, trans. Sarah Death (London: Picador, 2015).

existence, which does not need to check up on itself, that which (in Annabel's own words) "is entirely unselfconscious [...] just *works*."

The consistency and asceticism of Annabel's routine is known to all her friends and peers; they view her as a supremely self-disciplined student who even chooses her drinks (vodka and tonic) for their purity. In reality, however, her discipline repeatedly blurs and warps into distraction and spontaneity, taking her out on an unscheduled walk, pulling her mind away from the acceptable disciplinary terrain of literary studies into imagined scenes of Shakespeare and the Young Man of the Sonnets, and returning again and again to the stimulating but 'unproductive' fantasy she has constructed around two invented characters, the SCHOLAR and SEDUCER. These characters reproduce in microcosm some of Annabel's (and my own) founding ambivalences about discipline: the SCHOLAR tends towards solitude and a state of 'total work', but despite this—or perhaps as a result of it—is unable to rid himself of his infatuation with the SEDUCER. The SEDUCER, meanwhile, is primarily interested in pleasure and sociality, but is himself seduced by the glamour of the SCHOLAR's ascetic, fiercely intellectual lifestyle. Annabel's obsession with this dynamic leads to a cross-contamination between her essay, her imagination, and her own life which suggests, for instance, a reading of her boyfriend Rich as a SEDUCER-type figure asking to intrude upon her solitary, scholarly habits. Discipline, she finds, creates its own shadow in the form of indiscipline, a shadow which moves but cannot be extinguished; moreover, in the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, the more she tries to discipline her desires through her superego, the more 'supercharged', and therefore the more enjoyable, these desires become.¹¹

An easy critique might be made of how Annabel's life inside the 'Oxbridge bubble' is enabled by class and economic privilege: her family values the life of the mind, and has the money to allow her to pursue it. "The things she does, she does properly" is given as a kind of motto, and is exemplified by small markers such as drinking loose-leaf tea, using a cafetière to make coffee, and practising daily yoga, a skill presumably acquired via expensive classes. Annabel's awareness of this privilege,

¹¹ Todd McGowan suggests that this aspect of the superego and how it affects individual desires has often been ignored in the popular reception of Freud's *The Ego and the Id*, where he outlines his second topographical model (id/ego/superego). See Elizabeth Lunbeck, Amber Jamilla Musser, and Todd McGowan, "Sigmund Freud's The Ego and the Id," JSTOR Daily, January 21, 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/virtual-roundtable-on-the-ego-and-the-id/>.

however, fuels her compulsion to work, as well as a kind of frugality in the way, for instance, she reuses a teabag (“Since her family is well-off she must be thorough and heedful in all things”). Aware that there are no real obstacles to her being a model student, she feels discipline as a daily moral obligation, as well as a means to an end. Nevertheless, unlike the imagined nuns in Wordsworth’s sonnet, she frets constantly at her narrow room, drawing and redrawing the boundaries of her routine, and wondering if she should break up with Rich in order to work more single-mindedly, or if she should banish the SCHOLAR and SEDUCER entirely from her imagination. A final image of discipline in the novel appears in the figure of Grace, whose presence nibbles at the edge of Annabel’s consciousness throughout the day, but whom she only thinks about properly once disaster has struck and Grace has been hospitalised for a relapse of her anorexia. Grace provides a salutary reminder, towards the end of Annabel’s otherwise calm day, that too much discipline and solitude can also be a route towards illness—and so, spooked by this turn of events, Annabel agrees to Rich’s visit the following weekend in a kind of ambivalent recognition that no discipline can ever be perfect, no self-sufficiency complete.

The critical component: exploring writerly discipline

My critical project narrows in on, and begins to deconstruct, one specific aspect of discipline: its role in creative writing discourse. My opening conceptual discussion of discipline establishes that it is structurally blank and mobile, a moveable realm waiting to be populated by activities or styles considered to be disciplined (and excluding those considered undisciplined) according to external value-systems. Understanding what discipline is placed in opposition to, and how its practice is supposed to mitigate against those threats, is therefore key to analysing its political valency. In the case of what I am calling ‘writerly discipline’, discipline’s relationship with the fraught concept of *creativity* is key: the ways creativity is defined and understood as threatening or excessive carry implications for how it should be disciplined, and what, therefore, good art and good art-making should look like.

In order to see these patterns more clearly, my first chapter gathers and analyses a large number of recent interviews and articles in which various forms of writerly discipline are discussed and recommended, particularly the ‘writer’s routine’ to aid the

production of words, and practices of editing usually geared towards the *reduction* of words. My main conclusions from this analysis are: firstly, that the moralisation of practices of writerly discipline is pervasive, if sometimes ironised or challenged by writers themselves; and secondly, that discipline is placed into a shifting, mutually supplementary relationship with creativity, forming patterns of *demystifying* and *remystifying* statements according to which discipline must often be substituted for creativity but is never adequate to replace it entirely.

My second and third chapters further this investigation via the theories of Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault. Freud is essential to this project, not only because discourses of writerly discipline often deploy a kind of pop-Freudianism in their discussions of self-regulation and creativity, but also because Freud himself is a key contributor to the demystification/remystification tension—though, as I shall show, his work still remains useful in trying to deconstruct the cultural obsession with writerly discipline. Foucault, meanwhile, is a major theorist of social discipline, but even more usefully has investigated the ways that discourses can perform ‘discoveries’ of concepts like sexuality while simultaneously preserving a level of secrecy or mystery, creating an asymptotic narrative of progress which, by definition, can never attain a final unmasking. Ultimately, my critical project concludes, writerly discipline and the concept of innate personal creativity seem inextricable from one another, locked in a mutually constitutive structure which ensures that creativity is always in need of discipline, and discipline is empty without creativity. Any intervention against more pernicious doctrines underlying writerly discipline, therefore, must also engage with the problematic concept of creativity in order to hope to be effective.

The two projects in interrelation

Discipline, as I have suggested, has a holographic quality: an activity seen from different angles might count as disciplined, or not. In *Practice*, for instance, Annabel spends much of her morning reading sonnets, a form considered to be one of the pinnacles of literary discipline, but she is also struck by the showy, irritating, even embarrassing obsessiveness—the ostentatious emotional *indiscipline*—of Shakespeare’s Sonnets. In the case of writerly discipline, some writers are similarly

performative, insisting that they have endless, effortless motivation; Barbara Kingsolver even reports that, for her, “the discipline is turning off the computer and leaving my desk to do something else,” again echoing discipline’s shifting quality, its tendency to look and feel different for each individual.¹² Both my creative and critical projects engage closely with these ambiguities in their focus on the ‘daily routine’. Annabel’s routine consists of a repeated two-stage process: saying no, or sometimes yes, to her own urges, and seeing what is enabled or blocked by these decisions. During the mid-morning she chooses to break her routine, escaping her room for a walk in a rare, beautiful mist, and surrendering to fantasies which distract her from her work (and drift out of the conventional disciplinary terrain of literary studies), but which also enrich her understanding of it. Breaking the routine is a similarly ambiguous gesture in discourses of writerly discipline: Roddy Doyle, for instance, describes his practice of “mitching” (skiving off) as “something I shouldn’t be doing but that’s doing me good”.¹³ A routine is always accompanied by its negative image—the potential experiences and forms of knowledge it precludes—as well as troubling implications of automatism if it is followed too perfectly.

There are also resonances in *Practice* of Freudian psychoanalysis, a discourse I both critique and deploy in my critical project. Freud had a serious interest in fantasy—visible in papers like ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ and ‘A Child is Being Beaten’—which I share, though I am less interested than Freud in seeing ‘past’ or ‘through’ the fantasies into the essential wishes of the psyche, and more interested in fantasising as an activity in itself. In *Practice* Annabel spends large parts of her day in fantasy, imagining scenes between herself and various men she is attracted to, as well as between Shakespeare and the Young Man and the SCHOLAR and SEDUCER; for her, fantasy constitutes an autotelic project, approaching Roland Barthes’s description in his lecture series *How to Live Together*:

A fantasy (at any rate, what I call a fantasy): a resurgence of certain desires, certain images that lurk within you, that want to be identified by you, sometimes your whole life, and often only assume concrete form thanks to a particular word. That word, a key signifier, is what

¹² Quoted in James Clear, “The Daily Routines of 12 Famous Writers,” accessed August 13, 2020, <https://jamesclear.com/daily-routines-writers>.

¹³ Roddy Doyle, “My Writing Day: Roddy Doyle: My Work Is Fuelled by Music, Mitching and Mugs of Green Tea,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/09/roddy-doyle-writing-day-smile-novel>.

leads from the fantasy to its investigation. To mine the fantasy through snatches of knowledge = research. The fantasy is thus mined like an open quarry.¹⁴

Annabel is a serious fantasist, a committed self-miner exploring her own imagination rather than conducting a Freudian reading of it. Certain possible signifiers are offered for her central fantasy: the SCHOLAR and SEDUCER, or the black pond, a profoundly ambivalent image from which she briefly senses that all her fantasies and desires emanate, and which carries darker senses of masochism and self-annihilation. In the black pond, perhaps, is her unacknowledged figuration of the Freudian death drive, a theory which never made it into Freud's conception of creative writing but which became fundamental to his later work on masochism. For Annabel, the black pond represents, tantalisingly, the point at which no more discipline has to be exerted—both a negative image of her daily routine, and also, paradoxically, its logical endpoint.

*

A second novel is in development as further fruit of this project, taking its cue from the image of surrender to a larger, potentially perilous force as a strangely restful form of discipline. This novel, *Treatment*, finds Annabel fifteen years later in a state of desperation, emotionally exhausted and unable to extricate herself from a secret love affair: having spent much of her adult life cultivating discipline around work, she is painfully confronted with her own emotional indiscipline, the power of her fantasies and their disregard for reality-testing. By way of escape, she consigns herself for six months to the complete control of another person, Benedict Rose, who owns and manages a large country estate. Forbidden from reading and writing, and for speaking except for short defined periods, Annabel must learn a new economy of existence characterised by patience, receptivity, and obedience, and must come to terms with the reality of living with someone only too real and flawed despite her repeated attempts to romanticise him, as well as the hard facts of rural industry and countryside management. This novel will be an exploration of what I am calling *pastoral*

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, ed. Claude Coste, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 6.

masochism, the idea that both masochism and the pastoral tradition involve similar fantasies of restfulness. It is also a test of Foucault's suggestion that relations of domination are incompatible with what he calls "consensual disciplines"—that is, a relationship cannot be consensual and also based on domination.¹⁵ A typical feminist ethics would surely agree; my novel asks whether Annabel is right to hope that there might be exceptions. My intention after the PhD is to continue to work on this second project, which will be more expansive in scope than *Practice*, as part of my ongoing explorations of discipline and fantasy.

¹⁵ This mutual exclusivity is implied by the way Foucault responds, in a 1983 interview, in slightly different terms to those of the question:

M.F. [...] Power is not discipline; discipline is a possible procedure of power.

Q. But aren't there relations of discipline which are not necessarily relations of domination?

M.F. Of course, there are consensual disciplines.

DISCIPLINE YOUR DARLINGS: Writerly Discipline in Freud, Foucault, and the Discourses of Creative Writing

Critical component

Style note: I have regularised spellings, including quotations, to 'British English', changing 'z' to 's', and have changed single and double quotation marks where necessary to maintain stylistic consistency.

Introduction

It has long been a truism that to be a creative writer requires discipline. If the term *writer* is naturally tautologous—a writer is, simply, someone who writes—then discipline is what elevates the writer from dilettantism or hobbyism to professionalism and seriousness. The necessity of various forms of discipline in writing—what I am terming *writerly discipline*—is underwritten by a huge and varied set of discourses discussing the theory and practice of creative writing. Within these discourses, a disciplined writer is one who takes writing seriously enough that she writes not only occasionally, or when she feels like it, but consistently, sometimes (or even frequently) when she does not want to—often, for example, using a routine to ‘pre-decide’ her working hours. Additionally, a disciplined writer does not accept her first drafts as adequate, but works repeatedly and carefully on them to edit out any trace of self-indulgence or excess. A disciplined writer may not yet be published, or critically acclaimed, or award-winning; but in practising (and reporting) her own discipline she can still gain a measure of prestige unavailable to one whose practice is more casual or unregulated.

What is meant by discipline in the discourses I shall examine is almost always various forms of *self-discipline*, since creative writers tend to work alone, to long or non-existent deadlines, and thus are largely self-motivated; whatever discipline is a key ingredient in writerly success, therefore, must largely be practised by the writer on herself. As I shall show, self-disciplined practices as discussed in these discourses tend to fall into two categories: forms designed to encourage both the *production* of words through hours of work, involving the *activation* of one’s creativity; and forms geared towards the *reduction* of words, involving the *restraint* of one’s creativity, through the rigorous techniques of editing.

Despite the cultural pervasiveness of writerly discipline, however, it remains undertheorised: the discourses which advocate it have not been grouped and studied as such. In part this is because, as I shall show in this introduction, discipline as a concept is both unstable and blank, shifting its meaning in relation to whatever it is supposed to govern, and therefore has itself been minimally theorised. Moreover, critical attention to creative writing has tended to focus on its institutionalisation as a

university discipline and its pedagogy within those settings. The way that broader and more ‘unofficial’ types of discourse, such as journalism, blogs, and writing handbooks, implicitly theorise discipline in relationship to whatever it is supposedly disciplining will therefore be my focus in this project.

This project will argue that the implied ‘substrate’ of writerly discipline, the force it is imagined to regulate and restrain, is innate personal creativity, and that a relationship is set up between the two which, ultimately, may be mutually constitutive—that is, creativity can only be conceptualised in relation to how it is disciplined. I will begin by considering ways to theorise discipline as a philosophical and political concept, drawing out some fundamental tensions. I will then turn to a corpus of contemporary sources, and through discursive analysis demonstrate that certain sets of repeated gestures—moralisation, and ‘demystification’/ ‘remystification’—position writerly discipline as both necessary in order to access creativity, but inadequate to fully replace it. In my second and third chapters, closer theoretical work with texts by Sigmund Freud and Michel Foucault will enable some deeper analysis of these dynamics; ultimately, I will offer an account of writerly discipline as a moralised discursive construct based on specific ‘doctrines’ about how creativity and creative writing should work.

Conceptualising discipline

Situating discipline as a concept is difficult from the start, since the word covers such a broad semantic terrain. The noun *discipline* can refer to: the measurable behavioural tendency of a group or individual to follow a system of authority and rules; the corresponding psychological trait (as in *self-discipline*); a process of training and/or punishment; the practice which expresses or corresponds to a particular *doctrine*; or a field of knowledge and methodological techniques, as in academic disciplines.¹⁶ As a transitive verb (the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists no intransitive senses) *discipline* covers, likewise, the range of actions that one might inflict on someone else, from physical punishment and mortification, to training and education, sometimes with the quality of discipline itself as the aim (as in OED 2c, “To train to act or behave in an orderly, controlled, and effective manner; [...] to make disciplined”).¹⁷ Thus, *discipline* groups together a sprawl of ideas around knowledge, authority and control, punishment, orderliness and obedience; the word’s interlocking meanings enable one to say, strangely but without tautology, that it is one’s capacity for discipline in learning a particular discipline that will help one avoid receiving harsh discipline.

In a disciplinary structure, a transitive intersubjective dynamic of discipliner and disciplinee is usually present, whether these roles are sanctioned by legally defined power relations (e.g. parent/child, teacher/pupil, commander/soldier) or established more locally (as in the cognate *disciple*, or the highly personalised negotiations of sexual ‘bondage and discipline’). The intrasubjective character trait or process of *self-discipline* also seems to imagine this split, between an inner discipliner (perhaps the internalised voice of a parent) and an internal disciplinee (such as the ‘inner child’ frequently invoked in popular psychology), or as a past ‘resolver’ who now reappears

¹⁶ The word’s two etymons help to map its multiple denotations. *Disciplina* (Latin) exclusively signified the milder ideas of teaching, instruction, field of study, order, obedience etc.; and, evolving from this, *dicepline* (French) acquired additional senses around punishment, even extending into ‘massacre’ and ‘carnage’ in French, and an obsolete English sense ‘knowledge of military matters’ (OED 8). In English, the ‘punishment’ cluster has been present from its first usage (OED 1-3). See “Discipline, n.,” OED Online, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/53744?rskey=xqEfFK&result=1>.

¹⁷ “Discipline, v.,” OED Online, accessed March 11, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/53745>.

to block the present ‘rebel’.¹⁸ Whether self-discipline as a trait is conceived as genetically or psychically innate or as acquirable by repeated practice or incentives, how far this process may be conscious or unconscious, and where the values upheld by the (internal or external) discipliner come from, all have relevance for parenting, teaching, and socioeconomic policymaking. Explaining how discipline works, and why it is necessary, as Freud argued in ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’, is tantamount to explaining how civilised society works.

Despite its importance, however, discipline has not received detailed consideration as a philosophical concept in itself. It is absent as a term from, for instance, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and the *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*.¹⁹ One of the few fields where it is a recognised term is in education; thus Routledge’s *The Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia* contains an entry for *discipline*.²⁰ One of the main theorists cited in this entry is John Dewey, who himself noted in *Democracy and Education* (1916) that discipline as a pedagogical method tends to evade rigorous analysis, and that the description of traditional educational techniques as “disciplinary” has “stifled every question, subdued every doubt, and removed the subject from the realm of rational discussion”.²¹

Perhaps these omissions are motivated by discipline’s resistance to clear definition, and its circularity, since, as I have noted, discipline can be a process or a trait, can form both the means and the telos of itself, and can thus be cited as its own justification. Additionally, discipline is necessarily impermanent and unstable: maintaining good self-discipline always requires (more) self-discipline, or another

¹⁸ Richard Holton suggests that true weakness of will goes not against one’s better judgment but against one’s intentions, particularly one’s *resolutions*: that is, if one has resolved in the past to defend against one’s rebellious impulses in the future, then breaking the resolution does amount to weakness of will. Summarised in Sarah Stroud and Larisa Svirsky, “Weakness of Will,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/weakness-will/>.

¹⁹ The entry for ‘Weakness of Will’ in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is closest to a discussion of self-discipline. The conditions for *akrasia*, Aristotle’s term in the *Nicomachean Ethics* for weakness of will or incontinence, are highly debated, partly because of doubt about whether it is genuinely possible to believe one action is the best and then do something else, and partly because any judgment of which action is best must be highly normative, rather than descriptive. See Stroud and Svirsky.

²⁰ J. F. Covalleskie, “Discipline,” *Philosophy of Education: An Encyclopedia* (Routledge, 1996), <https://search-credoreference-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/content/entry/routpe/discipline/0?institutionId=1278>.

²¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education by John Dewey: With a Critical Introduction by Patricia H. Hinchey* (Bloomfield: Myers Education Press, 2018), 142.

quality such as motivation, Dewey's "interest", or even obsession.²² Thus a 'logic of the supplement' is present, according to which self-discipline can never be sufficient unto itself. Further than this, the exercise of too much self-discipline can easily tip over into its own form of obsession or compulsiveness, sliding (via a Moebian loop) into behaviours more often described as undisciplined. Self-discipline must therefore not only be maintained by self-discipline, but moderated by it too, rendering it ever more unstable and slippery. Some psychologists have even argued that what looks like self-discipline is often based on an individual's anxious compulsions, and may not in fact demonstrate self-mastery and maturity as previously supposed: not only can self-discipline tip into obsessive indiscipline, but the two may actually be the same thing.²³ A 'healthier' approach to self-control, this line of thinking goes, may be what the psychologist Jack Block calls "adaptively responsive variability"—that is, being able to choose when to be self-disciplined and when to let go and relax.²⁴ The best-regulated, most consistently self-disciplined people may be those who deliberately allow their own discipline to be imperfect.

Discipline's moral-political position is also uncertain. Discipline is morally valorised on both sides of the traditional political spectrum, though in different ways, as demonstrated by George Lakoff's *Moral Politics*, which analyses conservative and liberal worldviews. Lakoff employs metaphors of family dynamics to characterise conservatism as founded on what he calls "Strict Father Morality", and liberalism as founded on "Nurturant Parent Morality". He includes discipline as a desired result or 'output' in both models, but as a method or 'input' only in Strict Father Morality;²⁵ that is, he argues, conservative governments tend to use harsher disciplinary strategies to evoke the disciplined socioeconomic behaviour they want from citizens, whereas

²² Dewey argues that the 'negative' model of self-discipline in education often involves removing all interest from educational materials to teach students to rely entirely on their own willpower (Dewey, 143).

²³ See Alfie Kohn, "Why Self-Discipline Is Overrated: The (Troubling) Theory and Practice of Control from Within," alfiekohn.org, November 2008, <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/self-discipline-overrated/>.

²⁴ Cited in Kohn.

²⁵ For Lakoff, under Strict Father Morality, "People are disciplined (punished) in order to become self-disciplined. The way self-discipline is learned and character is built is through obedience. Being an adult means that you have become sufficiently self-disciplined so that you can be your own authority." In Nurturant Parent Morality, meanwhile, "Children become responsible, self-disciplined, and self-reliant through being cared for and respected, and through caring for others." Discipline and authority are thus prominent inputs or methods of Strict Father Morality, but not of Nurturant Parent Morality. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 67–68, 108.

liberal governments encourage this discipline through more supportive means. Thus, while how to instil discipline in citizens (or children) remains highly debatable and controversial, discipline as a character trait retains a kind of universal positive moral value which makes it difficult to analyse for its political substance.

In order to produce meaningful analysis of discipline, it is therefore necessary to examine the *doctrine* or ideology on which particular disciplinary practices are founded, including the threat they are supposed to defend against. Foucault famously argues in *The Will to Knowledge* (1976) that the architectural design of secondary schools and their systems of discipline “all [...] referred, in the most prolix manner, to the sexuality of children”:²⁶ that is, particular disciplinary practices were necessitated by a doctrine which regarded child sexuality as sinful and dangerous. Lakoff, likewise, notes that Strict Father Morality is based on a moralised suspicion of bodily ‘drives’, which it designates as sinful and against which it attempts to strengthen its subjects’ discipline.²⁷ Even Dewey himself serves as a primary example of this fear: he is in favour of economic progress and an ethos of hard work, but on the basis that socioeconomic inequality can result in differing “intelligence” types: those struggling against poverty become “hard”, while wealthy people who lack the “discipline of occupation” become “luxurious and effeminate” in their intelligence.²⁸ These latently conservative, often misogynistic, fears will recur in the way practices of writerly discipline are set in opposition to an innate personal creativity which is inevitably, threateningly wayward.

Conversely, a popular anticapitalist text such as Jenny Odell’s 2019 polemic *How to Do Nothing* can insist on self-discipline based on a doctrine which advocates meaningful engagement with communities and the environment. Odell cites Martin Buber’s ‘I-Thou’ model of relationality and William James’s work on attention to argue for a sustained, disciplined commitment to withdrawing our participation in capitalist systems of work and technology.²⁹ For Odell, this discipline is needed to defend against the increasing atomisation and isolation of the many individuals being drawn into commercialised digital interactions at the expense of real-world

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 27–28.

²⁷ Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 72–73.

²⁸ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 145.

²⁹ Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2019), 112–13, 119.

relationality and community. Arguments in favour of discipline can thus be motivated by either progressive or conservative political stances.

Another key problem in conceptualising discipline is its relativity: a judgement of whether or not a set of actions reflects ‘genuine’ self-discipline must be based on knowledge both of a person’s psychical dynamics and of the societal norms which inform them. If a person had resolved, for instance, to resist normative monogamy by practising polyamory, but then found it easier to keep her relationship monogamous rather than risk social conflict and disapproval, her ‘fidelity’ to her partner might look, but not actually feel, self-disciplined. A person who spends hours cleaning her house and doing administrative tasks out of a compulsive urge to be busy, rather than resting so she does not hit burnout, might similarly look self-disciplined and diligent while not in fact sticking to her own resolutions to care for herself. And—to give an example which will become a kind of test case in my analysis of writerly discipline—a writer who works compulsively for ten hours a day, driven by an overpowering creative urge, is presumably not as truly self-disciplined as one who must employ all her willpower to reach five hours’ work. A level of psychical strain must seemingly be present in order to validate a behaviour as disciplined, to the point where effortless productivity or creativity can actually be legible as indiscipline.

Normative societal judgments can also work in reverse, to categorise behaviour as undisciplined because it is not culturally legible—as exemplified by the racist trope of the ‘Angry Black Woman’, a documented phenomenon in which assertiveness in Black women is construed as uncontrolled aggression in culturally white-dominant environments.³⁰ The stress of difficult socioeconomic circumstances can also result in decision-making which appears concerned with immediate relief or gratification, and thus in those living in poverty being blamed for their own predicament;³¹ laudatory narratives of achievement through discipline, moreover, can cover up patterns of

³⁰ As discussed in, for instance: David Pilgrim, “The Sapphire Caricature,” Ferris State University, 2008, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/sapphire.htm>; and Ritu Prasad, “Serena Williams and the Trope of the ‘Angry Black Woman,’” BBC News, September 11, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-45476500>.

³¹ A widely cited 2017 report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation advocates interpreting “decision-making patterns associated with poverty as the product of psychosocial mechanisms that respond in purposive and rational ways to the experience of life at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum”—that is, decisions which may appear lazy or undisciplined actually function in understandable ways when studied closely, and should not attract criticism or socioeconomic sanctions. See Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington and Jessica Rea, “How Poverty Affects People’s Decision-Making Processes” (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2017), 6.

exploitation, as Martin Luther King observed in his 1967 speech ‘The Three Evils of Society’.³² Both individual psychologies and cultural norms thus affect the conditions for self-discipline to be categorised as such; in this sense, self-discipline may be definable as no more than a formal structure, an ordering or negating principle imposed on behaviours in relation to both personal intentions and sociocultural expectations: the ‘content’ of self-discipline, as I suggested above, must be supplied from elsewhere.³³

*

I have thus established some of the primary difficulties in analysing the concept of discipline: its semantic breadth, its structural instability, and its political ‘blankness’—that is, the need for an explanatory ‘doctrine’ to illuminate and justify its forms. My analysis of writerly discipline will be cognisant of all these, and will particularly explore the question of what doctrines underwrite writerly discipline and portray it as morally (rather than aesthetically) necessary. These doctrines are often implicit rather than clearly acknowledged in discourses of writerly discipline; when these discourses are collected and analysed, however, they reveal much unspoken theorising about writing and creativity, often pointing directly to some of art’s most fundamental debates.

³² “We have deluded ourselves into believing the myth that capitalism grew and prospered out of the Protestant ethic of hard work and sacrifice. The fact is that capitalism was built on the exploitation and suffering of black slaves and continues to thrive on the exploitation of the poor—both black and white, both here and abroad.” Quoted in Tavis Smiley, “Smiley: Capitalism Has Always Been Built on the Back of the Poor—Both Black and White,” *The World*, December 4, 2017, <https://theworld.org/stories/2017-12-04/smiley-capitalism-has-always-been-built-back-poor-both-black-and-white>.

³³ In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s entry on ‘Weakness of Will’, the concluding discussion of addiction as arguably exempt from accusations of *akrasia* reveals tensions in how decision-making is attributed sometimes to moral strength or weakness, and sometimes to neurobiological factors such as environmental cues and brain habits—that is, either a person is weak-willed or they actually lack free will. Edmund Henden explores these tensions, though seems to base his view of addiction as exceptional on the fact that addicts often do try hard to quit, but still fail—which seems a distinction by degree, rather than nature—and on the “observation [...] that we seem inclined to consider addicts *much less* criticisable (or blameworthy) for their drug-oriented behaviour than weak-willed persons for their weak-willed behaviour.” This second justification also seems inadequate, revealing rather how these two incompatible models of willpower nevertheless coexist in public consciousness and are alternately appealed to depending on pre-existing moral values. See Stroud and Svirsky, “Weakness of Will”; and Edmund Henden, “Addiction, Compulsion, and Weakness of the Will,” in *Addiction and Choice: Rethinking the Relationship*, ed. Nick Heather and Gabriel Segal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 124.

My first chapter will show that creativity is the ‘substrate’ on which practices of writerly discipline are supposed to operate, and to this end I will begin by situating the modern concept of creativity in its Anglo-American history since the Romantic period, demonstrating in particular that the necessity of discipline has long been a key feature of accounts of creativity. I will then undertake a discourse analysis of creative writing handbooks and journalism of the 2000s and 2010s, as well as some of the earlier texts which have influenced them, to draw out some key trends and tensions and more clearly identify the relationship being set up between writerly discipline and personal creativity. Two key forms of self-discipline emerge, along with the implied threats they defend against: discipline which ensures the *production* of writing and defends against creativity’s unreliability is particularly prominent in the ‘writer’s routine’, a subject of ongoing fascination in recent decades; conversely, discipline which amounts to a stringent *reduction* (in length, in ornateness, in self-expression) of the drafted text is supposed to defend against creativity’s inevitable, but deplorable, excessiveness. In both cases, I will document the tendency of these discourses to subtly moralise writerly discipline so that it becomes not only a useful strategy but an ethical *duty*. Furthermore, I will show that these discourses seem to use self-discipline as a ‘demystifying’ lens through which creativity and writing can be conceived as simply a matter of quantifiable labour and editing techniques, but that they simultaneously include a form of exceptionality which in fact serves to ‘remystify’ creativity by reiterating its unpredictability and ineffability, often with recourse to psychoanalytic-type discussions of the unconscious. In the end, a series of deferrals and displacements occurs in these discourses which implicitly acknowledges self-discipline as necessary, but never sufficient; a form of ‘raw’ creativity (which might even take the form of deliberate indiscipline) is always needed to supplement writerly discipline, and possibly even remains the mark of the ‘true’ writer.

My second chapter, prompted by the pop-Freudianism which recurs in discourses of writerly discipline, will further examine the role of Freudian psychoanalysis in theorising the relationship between self-discipline and creativity. I will begin by showing that Freud’s own accounts of how mechanisms of self-discipline (the reality principle and superego) relate to art-making are already strikingly ambivalent. Next, I will argue via a close reading of ‘Creative Writers and Daydreaming’ (1908) that Freud, despite his cultural status as a great ‘demystifier’, was in fact highly invested in preserving the mystery of creativity and creative writing,

and performs a series of abdications on these subjects which at times even confuse some of the most fundamental principles of psychoanalysis. Finally, in a more speculative coda, I will use Freud's essay 'Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices' (1907) to suggest that the deferrals and displacements effected both by Freud himself and by discourses of writerly discipline perhaps serve to defend against a final demystification of creativity, perhaps even against an imagined or feared future prohibition of writing.

My third chapter, seeking a way to move beyond the tensions in both Freud's work and my contemporary corpus, will turn to one of the twentieth century's most prominent theorists of discipline, Michel Foucault. Foucault's analysis of enclosed institutions in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) provides some opportunities for analogies with writerly discipline, namely the possibility that writers perform discipline in response to a perception of increased surveillance, and also that the strict stylistics encouraged by discourses of writerly discipline could be described via Foucault's idea of 'docility'. As I will show, however, it is Foucault's work on sexuality which is most helpful for analysing writerly discipline, particularly his account of how discourses combine to construct a central 'force'—such as sexuality, or indeed creativity—which they claim to discover while simultaneously insisting on its mystery. In order to structure and summarise my work in this project, I will also use Foucault's tools for ethical analysis to begin to characterise the moral doctrine on which writerly discipline is apparently based, and will suggest, more speculatively, that even informal discourses of writerly discipline have a coherence comparable to that of an academic discipline.

In a short conclusion I will briefly consider the implications of my analysis for further research into the relationship between creative writing and discipline. This project as a whole is primarily motivated by my unease with what appear to be the underlying doctrines or ideologies of writerly discipline, and their cumulative implication that writers who are not recognisably self-disciplined in specific ways are morally irresponsible individuals likely to produce inefficient, time-wasting, and even offensive texts. The widespread reiteration of these ideals of writerly discipline both within and outside academic institutions suggests a narrowed and often implicitly conservative view of creativity as tending towards one of the sinful 'drives' Lakoff mentions, and therefore threatening to 'civilised' culture unless properly managed. While attempts to reform and decolonise university creative writing pedagogy,

including the supposed political neutrality of ‘craft’, are already under way and constitute a welcome challenge to this status quo, the casual browser of online or extramural creative writing advice is still most likely to encounter injunctions of strict and specific disciplinary techniques in writing and editing their work, to the point where what is apparently being edited out is precisely the *pleasure* of writing. I will therefore reflect in my conclusion on the conditions for moving away from these limiting models of creative writing—which, though it may not entail a wholesale abandonment of practices of discipline in writing, may require a jettisoning of the originally progressive concept of innate personal creativity, along with its supposed deficiencies which are supposed to make discipline so necessary. This critical project is thus part of readjustments in my own thinking about how creative writing happens, and what the roles of discipline and ethics might be in a healthy creative practice.

1

“People often ask how I discipline myself to write”

Locating Writerly Discipline

As I noted in my introduction, disciplinary practices are conceptually and politically illegible without knowledge of the doctrine on which they are based, including the supposed threat they are designed to control and protect against. In this chapter I will collect various sources which speak to the theme of writerly discipline, firstly considering its history as a key component of the modern concept of creativity, and then drawing out some patterns and tensions in more recent texts. As I shall show, discussions of creativity in its modern form as a secularised and innate human faculty have in fact included from their inception the necessity of some form of conscious disciplinary activity in order to shape and restrain creativity's force. Romanticism, while celebrating the gifted individual writer, remained deeply suspicious of too sensualised or liberated a form of raw creativity; this suspicion, enhanced by an increasing valorisation of 'literary labour' as a value in itself, has remained constant through the Modernist period and into the twenty-first century, establishing an ambivalent model of creativity in which its universality and fecundity are to be both celebrated and mistrusted.

After a brief survey of this history, I will turn to a corpus of texts from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to demonstrate that discourses of writerly discipline rely on a structurally ambiguous model of creativity in which discipline is both morally obligatory and something from which a 'true' writer can free herself. These discourses, recommending both 'productive' and 'reductive' forms of discipline, also repeatedly seem to wish to demystify creativity, recasting it as a matter of quantifiable and classifiable techniques, but simultaneously attempt to preserve the glamour of creative writing by returning us to a model in which mysterious creativity

must sometimes be allowed to trump discipline. It is this ambiguity, or perhaps even ambivalence—the simultaneous holding of two contradictory feelings or beliefs without possibility of dialectic resolution—which will inform my subsequent chapters.

“An interpenetration of passion and of will”:

Creativity and discipline in Anglo-American literary theory

Histories of creativity tend to see the moment of its secularisation—that is, the idea of a *human* creative power which is separate to, though lesser than, that of God—as the beginning of its modern identity.³⁴ From this point, around the eighteenth century, the creative faculty (closely linked to older terms like *genius* and *inspiration*) became conceived as an innate human quality, rather than a state of possession or invasion by an external spirit or deity. This humanised version of inspiration was central to Romantic philosophy, and prompted what Timothy Clark calls the “sacralisation” of the writer: “Romanticism,” he writes, “exalted creativity as the object of a new mythology”.³⁵ Clark describes the “mystifying” effect this development had on models of art-making, including the fact that the state of inspiration supposedly guaranteed both the authority of the writer—greatest when the writer least knew what they were doing—and the quality of the work. Paul Dawson notes, too, that the presence of true ‘genius’ was seen to absolve a writer from needing to learn the usual rules of composition, that the discipline of technique could be dispensed with by a superlatively ‘creative’ individual³⁶—which, as I shall show, is a belief still sometimes visible in today’s discourses.

Simultaneously, however, canonical Romantic theory also insisted from the start that the innate creative impulse must always be tempered with a form of conscious discipline. Coleridge wrote in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) that a poet must combine two parts of himself, suggesting a dialectical model of creativity and discipline: “There must be not only a partnership, but a union; an interpenetration of passion and of will, of spontaneous impulse and of voluntary purpose.”³⁷ Wordsworth, considering similar

³⁴ See Raymond Williams’s discussion of how the word *creation* was tethered to the Creation of Judaeo-Christian theology until the Renaissance, and, in its secular meanings, was extended through its various cognates, such as *creative* and *creativity*, from the eighteenth century. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (London: Fontana Press, 1988), 82–83.

³⁵ Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and Post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 5.

³⁶ Paul Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 28–29.

³⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London: Rest Fenner, 1817), 66. Samuel Rowe traces the slippages in *Biographia Literaria* between a model of poetry where emotion and the will are working in partnership, and another—quite

questions, asserted in the Preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) that poetic writing must be limited to ordinary language and regular metre because they provide the safety of *form* (“to which the Poet and Reader willingly submit because they [the forms] are certain”); he also muses on the risk of poetry having an ‘over-exciting’ effect on the reader, recommending metre for its “efficacy in tempering and restraining” this excitement.³⁸ His insistence that poetry arises from powerful emotions being recollected and contemplated in “tranquillity” to produce a controlled reproduction of those emotions suggests his suspicion of the ‘raw’ creative state—“there is some danger,” he warns, “that the excitement may be carried beyond its proper bounds”—and his investment in ensuring that creativity is restrained and shaped by discipline.³⁹

As Dawson notes, the secularised Romantic model of creativity held potential for extending the creative faculty to all people, rather than just gifted individuals;⁴⁰ and it was in this direction that creativity evolved during the nineteenth century, with Matthew Arnold declaring in ‘The Function of Criticism at the Present Time’ (1864) that “a free creative activity”, which can take many forms and is therefore accessible to many, is “the highest function of man”.⁴¹ Industrialisation, as Raymond Williams argues, only served to strengthen belief in this model of creativity as superior to reason and emphatically opposed to a mechanised and scientific view of society.⁴² By the early twentieth century, innate universal creativity was widely established as a concept, with some recommending it be harnessed for commercial and industrial innovation,⁴³ and others, such as the authors of the 1921 Newbolt Report, advocating a focus on creativity in school education for the purpose of (non-productive) personal growth.⁴⁴ Creativity also became aligned with the universal Freudian unconscious—a

contrary to popular ideas of Romanticism—where the will must dominate and master the emotion altogether. See Samuel Rowe, “Coleridgean Kink: Christabel, Metrical Masochism, and Poetic Dissonance,” *English Literary History* 83, no. 2 (2016): 580.

³⁸ William Wordsworth, Preface to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1991), 262, 264.

³⁹ Wordsworth, Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 266, 264.

⁴⁰ Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, 32.

⁴¹ Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), 4.

⁴² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 49–50.

⁴³ For instance, Richard Florida’s ‘Creative Class’ derives its economic identity from being “purveyors of creativity”, which Florida sees as “the driving force of economic growth”. Quoted in Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, 45–46.

⁴⁴ Henry Newbolt et al, “The Teaching of English in England: Being the Report of the Departmental Committee Appointed by the President of the Board of Education to Inquire into the Position of English

trend which, as I shall show, retains contemporary currency—and was imagined to be accessible through practices of automatic writing, as developed by André Breton and other Surrealists. All this had the (perhaps inadvertent) effect of demystifying, even devaluing creativity through democratisation, leading J.E. Spingarn to declare in 1917: “Genius and taste no longer mean for us what they meant to the poets and critics of the Romantic period. Their halo, their mystery, their power are gone”.⁴⁵

Alongside the increasing democratisation of creativity—and perhaps in response to it—evolved a model of artistic production which emphasised disciplined *work* as the highest value. It is easy to see how the former necessitates the latter: if all humans are potentially creative, some other distinguishing factor is needed to explain why some individuals become creative artists and others do not. Roland Barthes suggests that a turning point occurred around 1850 after which literary composition became viewed in terms of ‘craftsmanship’, a combination of technique and work. Literature, he argues, faced

a problem of self-justification [...] a whole class of writers anxious to assume to the full the responsibility of their tradition is about to put the work-value of writing in place of its usage-value. Writing is now to be saved not by virtue of what it exists for, but thanks to the work it has cost. There begins now to grow up an image of the writer as a craftsman [...] devoting to his work regular hours of solitary effort. [...] Labour replaces genius as a value, so to speak; there is a kind of ostentation in claiming to labour long and lovingly over the form of one’s work. There even arises, sometimes, a preciousness of conciseness (for labouring at one’s material usually means reducing it), in contrast to the great preciousness of the baroque era.⁴⁶

Barthes particularly associates this new “preciousness of conciseness” with the writing practice of Gustave Flaubert, his agonising search for *le seul mot juste*, and terms this new valorisation of work the “flaubertisation” of writing.⁴⁷ Dawson, picking up Barthes’s argument, also adduces Paul Valéry’s emphasis on work in his essay ‘On Literary Technique’ (1899), in which Valéry asserts, “I consider *work itself* as having

in the Educational System of England,” Education in England, accessed March 8, 2022, <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/newbolt/newbolt1921.html>.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, 45.

⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 68–69.

⁴⁷ Barthes, 72.

its own value, generally much superior to that which the crowd attaches only to the *product*.”⁴⁸ Noting that T.S. Eliot wrote an introduction to Valéry’s *The Art of Poetry*, in which this essay appeared, Dawson suggests (like Barthes) that this model found its way into the Modernist image of the author as a painstaking craftsman.⁴⁹

Many accounts of Modernism correspondingly emphasise the conscious placing of disciplined ‘craft’ over creativity. Laura Frost, for instance, argues that Modernism arose precisely in response to a suspicion of the somatic pleasures of ‘low’ culture, and aimed to refine and redefine pleasure as something which should be found in difficult, highly wrought art-making.⁵⁰ Often the ‘doctrine’ on which this new artistic discipline was based employed sexualised or racist stereotypes to figure what a lack of discipline might permit. Suzanne Raitt traces, for example, the Edwardian period’s increasing obsession with efficiency, and quotes Arnold Bennett on the importance of training one’s brain lest it remain “idle as a nigger”.⁵¹ Hannah Sullivan’s study of practices of Modernist authorial revision argues, likewise, that Imagism introduced into Modernism a particular valorisation of *excision*—which, as I will demonstrate, is still one of the primary recommended forms of writerly discipline. Sullivan especially focuses on Ezra Pound, who famously cut sections of work by H.D., F. Scott Fitzgerald and T.S. Eliot to render them more conspicuously ‘formal’. Like Raitt, Sullivan links this minimalism to the fashion for efficiency, and also detects a misogynistic undercurrent, arguing that the discipline of excision was intended to exert “manly control” over a text which might otherwise be femininely “chatty, formless, and digressive”.⁵² Mark McGurl’s history of institutionalised creative writing in the US also notes—though is insufficiently critical of—the exclusion of the novelist Thomas Wolfe from the literary canon on the basis of his “graphomania”;⁵³ McGurl reproduces

⁴⁸ Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Folliot (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 177 (emphasis in original).

⁴⁹ Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities*, 64–65.

⁵⁰ Laura Frost, *The Problem with Pleasure: Modernism and Its Discontents* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 3.

⁵¹ Quoted in Suzanne Raitt, “The Rhetoric of Efficiency in Early Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 13, no. 1 (2006): 837.

⁵² Hannah Sullivan, *The Work of Revision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 118. Sullivan also quotes F.S. Flint’s ‘Imagisme’ manifesto which urges poets “[t]o use absolutely no word that [does] not contribute to the presentation”. As Sullivan notes, “Like a zip file, the Imagist poem allows for maximally efficient transfer of material between writer and reader” (106).

⁵³ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (London: Harvard University Press, 2009), 82.

a review by Bernard DeVoto of Wolfe's *The Story of a Novel* (1936) which describes Wolfe's 'excessive' writing in graphically visceral terms as "placenta", and as

long, whirling discharges of words, unabsorbed in the novel, unrelated to the proper business of fiction, badly if not altogether unacceptably written, raw gobs of emotion, aimless and quite meaningless jabber, claptrap, belches, grunts.⁵⁴

DeVoto's review is tellingly entitled 'Genius Is Not Enough', and suggests that Wolfe departs from "the proper business of fiction" precisely by failing to curb his own 'excessive' creativity. Thus, in this period, discipline becomes an idealised, distinguishing practice to mark 'proper' art as separate from this messy, sexualised, creative excess. Although a robust critical history has examined these kinds of assumptions—in particular the association between stylistic ornament or ornateness and femininity, queerness and sexuality⁵⁵—similar implications, as I shall show, still recur in the way practices of writerly discipline are prescribed to contemporary writers.

⁵⁴ Bernard DeVoto, "Genius Is Not Enough: The Story of a Novel, by Thomas Wolfe," *The Saturday Review*, April 25, 1936, 3–4; discussed in McGurl, *The Program Era*, 99. McGurl seems more amused than troubled by DeVoto's latently misogynistic fear of the unrestrained outpourings of the feminised body; he ultimately fails to properly critique the masculinism at the heart of this rhetoric of efficiency, conciseness, and self-control. Nor does he sufficiently examine his own observation that Joyce Carol Oates's prodigious output seems to have helped to exclude her from the most prestigious tier of 'literary' writers, *despite* her rigorous work ethic; discipline which leads to perceived 'overproduction', it seems, can disqualify a writer from the prestigious 'craft' value-system which favours excision above all. See McGurl, 308.

⁵⁵ This association is exemplified by Walter Bagehot's 1864 essay contrasting the styles of Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning. Bagehot distinguishes between "pure" style in poetry which "chastens", and "ornate" style (which he compares to rouge) which "leaves on the mind a mist of beauty, an excess of fascination, a complication of charm"; he speculates that women prefer the "delicate unreality" of ornate style to the "true or firm art" of pure style. Bagehot is also, supposedly, the first person to have used *padding* as a term for 'unnecessary' material in a piece of literature.

More recently, Naomi Schor's feminist study of the 'detail' in art and philosophy argues that the detail participates in "a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose 'prosiness' is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women." Rae Beth Gordon's 1992 study of nineteenth-century French literature, which takes many of its terms from the decorative arts, also cites Bagehot as an example of the suspicion hanging over any artwork which creates effects of imagination, illusion, excess, confusion and seduction. Gordon suggests a link between ornament and hysteria ("Excessive decoration, in the traditional view of ornament as added onto structure, is never far from decomposing its structural underpinnings"), and both Schor and Gordon cite essays by the architect and art critic Adolf Loos, who explicitly associated ornament with the erotic (though Schor detects an unacknowledged enjoyment of ornamentation in a passage by Loos about his shoes).

Marco Wan takes up these arguments in an examination of French reportage of Oscar Wilde's court appearances in 1895; one journalist's focus on Wilde's sartorial ornaments (especially his gloves), Wan argues, constructs Wilde as "an embodiment of decadent writing", and therefore, via an association between ornament and effeminacy, as "the representative of a homosexual style of writing". Just as the asceticism of early Modernism might be seen as a reaction to aestheticist decadence, so the contemporary culture of writerly discipline which has emerged from Modernism carries residual

The institutionalisation of Creative Writing (CW) in universities has arguably formalised and frozen the role of discipline in models of writing, since its success depends on the premise that creativity is innate and widespread but requires conscious, disciplinary (in more senses than one) cultivation in the form of ‘craft’. McGurl acknowledges discipline as a founding value, arguing that CW was keen from the start to establish itself as “a sufficiently arduous discipline”, and that “one of the avowed benefits of creative writing instruction is an increased appreciation, on the part of the student, of the true difficulty of the achievements of ‘real’ writers”.⁵⁶ Likewise, Eric Bennett observes that early CW programs carried a focus on discipline as a separable character trait that could be developed alongside writing skills;⁵⁷ and Michelene Wandor has criticised British CW workshops as often “brutal and patronising” pedagogical environments—that is, unnecessarily ‘disciplinary’ and insufficiently nurturing.⁵⁸ The focus on craft, meanwhile, has been attributed by D.G. Myers to its ‘teachability’ (unlike genius),⁵⁹ and by Mark McGurl to an ‘Arts and Crafts’ model of

resistance to the ‘deviant’ or ‘excessive’ sexuality originally associated with decadent literature and authors. See Walter Bagehot, “Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry,” in *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 596, 603; Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Methuen, 1987), 4, 50–55; Rae Beth Gordon, *Ornament, Fantasy, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 21, 216, 25; Marco Wan, “From the Rack to the Press: Representation of the Oscar Wilde Trials in the French Newspaper *Le Temps*,” *Law & Literature* 18, no. 1 (2006): 56–57.

⁵⁶ McGurl, *The Program Era*, 130, 16. McGurl also reproduces a photograph of Paul Engle, an early director of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, sitting at a typewriter with a whip curled next to him (“Whether he intends to use it on himself or someone else is not clear” (145)), quotes a student’s description of Gordon Lish’s workshops as a “12-gauge evisceration of your work” (293), characterises Flannery O’Connor’s relationship with the discipline of Iowa as “masochistic” (128ff.), and discusses the importation of the Jamesian “scenic method” into CW pedagogy. McGurl argues that the scenic method, sloganised in the academy and his book as *Show don’t tell*, was taken up by Fitzgerald and Hemingway before it was incorporated in the academy, and reproduced a “general understanding of good fiction as founded on discipline, restraint, and the impersonal exercise of hard-won technique” (99): technique here is a means of *moderating*, rather than enhancing, self-expression. Implicit in this is a version of *Kill your darlings*, though regrettably McGurl does not examine this slogan.

⁵⁷ “The fledgling [American] creative writing programs, emerging from a philosophy concerned with character rather than scholarship, assumed, if not that everybody was an artist, then at least that everybody could benefit from submitting to the discipline of pretending to be one”. Just as bad writing is sometimes supposed to result from poor moral discipline, so learning to write well will improve character. See Eric Bennett, “Ernest Hemingway and the Discipline of Creative Writing, Or, Shark Liver Oil,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 3 (2010): 546.

⁵⁸ Michelene Wandor, *The Author Is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing Reconceived* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 131. Wandor’s view is challenged by Andrew Cowan in a 2012 paper: see Andrew Cowan, “A Live Event, a Life Event: The Workshop That Works,” *TEXT* 16, no. 1 (April 2012), <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april12/cowan.htm>.

⁵⁹ D.G. Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 75–76. Myers also investigates the role of literary criticism as an explicit substitute for self-expression in the formation of CW as a discipline (134–7, 158–9).

art production seen as “ennobling, soul-satisfying labour” in contrast to the forms of work gaining contemporary dominance throughout the twentieth century, “the loads of hurried shit work carried out in an office or retail environment.”⁶⁰ For whatever reason—whether as a form of character-building, a reactionary response to racialised, sexualised fears of logorrheic texts, a progressive form of ‘de-alienation’ between worker and work, or simply a ‘teachable’ skill—the technique of conscious, painstaking, disciplined craft advocated by many Modernists has dominated CW pedagogy, and its associated discourses, for much of the twentieth century.

Critiques of ‘craft’ as a focus of academic CW are now common, and there is evidence that CW pedagogy is evolving in response to what is partly a decolonising campaign, a drive to acknowledge the cultural specificity of some falsely universalised writing rules.⁶¹ What has not been so widely examined, however, is the dominance of the ‘discipline and craft’ model of creative writing in popular literary discourse outside universities, such as authors’ own accounts of their practices, writers’ websites, and creative writing handbooks. The internet has enabled a widespread dissemination and popularisation of these discourses; perhaps, indeed, they are so popular because novice writers imagine they make available the kinds of ‘secrets’ taught in university CW. Nevertheless, these discourses tend to lack accompanying scholarly reflection: although they clearly show their descent from the theories of creativity I outlined above in their repeated appeals to the necessity of discipline for successful writing, they theorise them less explicitly and often do not acknowledge their contradictions and limitations. In this sense, although discipline has been part of models of innate

⁶⁰ McGurl, *The Program Era*, 297. As Raymond Williams notes in his *Keywords* entry on ‘Work’, an entire political movement was formed on the basis of the dignity of labour. See Williams, *Keywords*, 337.

⁶¹ For instance: Paul Dawson protests that formal ‘craft’ devices are taught synchronically, as if ahistorical, and should be recontextualised; Namrata Poddar critiques *Show don’t tell* for similar reasons; and Matthew Salesses’s four-part essay ‘Pure Craft Is a Lie’ argues that craft is always culturally and locally informed. Salesses examines the recommendation to use *said* in dialogue instead of other speech verbs; this is because, Salesses argues, *said* has become invisible to readers due to both cultural agreement about the purpose of a dialogue tag (i.e. to identify the speaker), and the echo chamber effect of frequently reading it in other (Western) literary texts. See Paul A. Dawson, “Historicising ‘Craft’ in the Teaching of Fiction,” *New Writing* 5, no. 3 (2008): 211–24; Namrata Poddar, “Is ‘Show Don’t Tell’ a Universal Truth or a Colonial Relic?,” *Literary Hub*, September 20, 2016, <https://lithub.com/is-show-dont-tell-a-universal-truth-or-a-colonial-relic/>; Matthew Salesses, “Pure Craft Is a Lie (Part 1),” *Pleiades: Literature in Context*, accessed July 5, 2021, <https://pleiadesmag.com/pure-craft-is-a-lie-part-1/>.

human creativity since their inception, discourses of writerly discipline may represent a false universalising of what it might look like.

The rest of this chapter will examine these extra-mural contemporary discourses, focusing on a corpus of mostly recent texts about writerly discipline, and drawing out some patterns and tensions in how discipline and creativity are positioned in mutual interrelation. My corpus is made up of (1) writing handbooks and journalism aimed at novice writers, especially texts which recommend self-discipline either explicitly or implicitly as a crucial ingredient of a writer's practice; and (2) illustrative texts in which writers' practices are described and/or collected, either by the writers themselves or by an anthologist. When it comes to style and editing, I am particularly interested in discussions of prose—whether fiction or non-fiction is not always specified—as this is the commonest topic in the discourse; specific suggestions for editing poetry or scripts are rarer, and divergent enough that my project cannot do them justice. Most of my sources are from the 2000s and 2010s, but I will also have recourse to older texts to suggest the lineage of some particular ideas, and to show how the repeated citation of dead writers' routines and habits can create a powerful discursive continuity, even across several centuries. Within these texts, I have looked not only for specific mentions of the word 'discipline', but for the general theme of imposing a principle of order or regularity on one's writing practice, sometimes with the intention that these principles might function as resolutions which will override one's own later preferences.

Two major classes of disciplinary practices, as I shall show, are reported and recommended in these discourses, each implying a problem or threat posed by creativity which the discipline is supposed to address. Firstly, there are practices which ensure the writer will write (or at least get to her desk) even when/if she does not want to: these practices are usually related to the *production* of the creative text, and are aimed at coaxing or activating creativity, which is naturally unreliable and reluctant. Secondly, there are practices which bring the creative text into some kind of order via techniques of editing which are designed to curb or purify a writer's creativity, usually involving the *reduction* of the text; this intervention is deemed necessary because of creativity's tendency towards excessiveness and self-indulgence. Across the whole discourse, moreover, additional patterns are visible in the way writerly discipline is discussed in relation to creativity. Importantly, discipline is recommended not simply as a practical strategy but as a moral duty, with the implication that if a writer fails to

practise discipline, particularly at the editing stage, her writing is likely to be not only bad but morally inferior, even offensive. Furthermore, there is a striking push-pull within these discourses between a tendency to *demystify* the process of writing—that is, to make it a matter of scheduling and editing techniques—and a contrary determination to *remystify* it by showing the limits of these disciplined practices. As I shall show, this recurring tension perhaps points to an underlying doctrine or theory of writing in which discipline and creativity are mutually supplementary and mutually necessitating: creativity must be restrained by discipline, but never fully replaced by it.

“When you can’t create you can work”:

The productive discipline of the writer’s routine

“Unlocking creativity isn’t about sitting back, goofing off, and waiting for inspiration to strike,” a 2019 online article asserts. “It’s about meticulously curating the right conditions to foster creativity.”⁶² Creativity here is both a lock to be picked, and a force to be nourished (*fostered*) and cared for (*curated*). Actively managing creativity with a *meticulously* designed practice is tellingly contrasted to a form of writing which might consist in *waiting* for the random *strikes* of *inspiration*, or (more disparagingly) *goofing off*. When spontaneous creativity is lacking, therefore, the practice of discipline is always available and ensures that a writer can never goof off (or be seen to goof off): discipline is both a substitute for, and a way to coax, creativity.

Perhaps the commonest way in which writers claim or are encouraged to coax creativity through discipline is by developing a writing routine to ensure their productivity. The focus on routines is now a key part of discourses of writerly discipline: whatever proportion of writers actually does follow a routine, descriptions and collections of writers’ routines have now become, as Nick Greene notes, “an entire genre of web content”,⁶³ and are especially widespread in the 2010s compared with earlier periods—reflecting, perhaps, both the explosion in cheap web publishing and a general anxiety about attention and distraction in the digital age. Among the six million or so Google results for ‘writer’s routine’, one finds dedicated websites such as Mason Currey’s *Daily Routines*, now published as two book-length collections,⁶⁴ and the website and podcast *Writer’s Routine*.⁶⁵ Other regular series include Noah Charney’s ‘How I Write’ interviews on *The Daily Beast*, and *The Guardian*’s ‘My Writing Day’

⁶² Nathan Wade, “Creativity: 3 Ways To Cultivate Discipline In Your Writing Life,” *The Creative Penn*, March 1, 2019, <https://www.thecreativepenn.com/2019/03/01/creativity-3-ways-to-cultivate-discipline-in-your-writing-life/>.

⁶³ Nick Greene, “I Copied the Routines of Famous Writers and It Sucked,” *Vice*, January 22, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/wjpy8z/i-copied-the-routines-of-famous-writers-and-it-sucked.

⁶⁴ Mason Currey, “Daily Routines,” accessed May 20, 2020, https://dailyroutines.typepad.com/daily_routines/; Mason Currey, *Daily Rituals: How Great Minds Make Time, Find Inspiration, and Get to Work*, Kindle (London: Pan Macmillan, 2013); Mason Currey, *Daily Rituals: Women at Work* (London: Picador, 2019).

⁶⁵ “Writer’s Routine,” accessed August 13, 2020, <https://writersroutine.com>.

column, which appeared both online and in its *Saturday Review* supplement.⁶⁶ Books which anthologise or collect writers' routines have also appeared during the 2010s—not only Mason Currey's two collections, but also Celia Blue Johnson's book *Odd Type Writers* (2013), as well as the first chapter of Andrew Cowan's *The Art of Writing Fiction* (also 2013), which lists writers' routines as a way of encouraging novice writers to develop a writing 'lifestyle'.⁶⁷ Some writers' routines are so frequently cited as to have become quasi-mythologised after their deaths: the habits of Anthony Trollope, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller and Maya Angelou are among the most commonly listed, indicating that they still speak powerfully to contemporary cultures of writerly discipline.⁶⁸

Imposing a routine on oneself is supposed, as I have said, to be a way to coax or train one's powers of creativity into regular productivity, often with appeals to a kind of pseudo-Freudian idea of creativity as a 'deep' force, or analogous to dreaming. Haruki Murakami, for instance, reports that he follows the same routine every day for 6-12 months when he is writing, as a way of "mesmerising" himself into "a deeper state of mind";⁶⁹ and Stephen King suggests his regular timings, music, chair and arrangements of papers serve "the cumulative purpose of [...] saying to the mind, you're going to be dreaming soon."⁷⁰ As well as a regular schedule, daily word or page quotas are common in descriptions of writers' routines: if the routine helps a writer get to their desk, the addition of a word count target ensures they are productive when they

⁶⁶ "Noah Charney," *The Daily Beast*, 2012, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/author/noah-charney>. *The Guardian's* column, which ran for nearly two years between April 2016 and January 2018, will be a key source in this chapter, as it exclusively comprises lengthy descriptions of writers' routines in their own words, unlike many other sources which summarise or reword routines, or discuss a writer's routine as part of a longer article or interview.

⁶⁷ Celia Blue Johnson, *Odd Type Writers: From Joyce and Dickens to Wharton and Welty, the Obsessive Habits and Quirky Techniques of Great Authors* (New York, NY: Perigee, 2013); Andrew Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 5–7.

⁶⁸ See, for instance: Alex Simmonds, "Daily Habits & Writing Routines of 21 Famous Authors," *ProWritingAid*, October 11, 2021, <https://prowritingaid.com/writing-routines-famous-authors>; "The Daily Routines of the Famous Writers [sic]," *The Bookish Elf*, accessed February 14, 2022, <https://www.bookishelf.com/daily-routines-of-famous-writers/>; James Clear, "The Daily Routines of 12 Famous Writers," accessed August 13, 2020, <https://jamesclear.com/daily-routines-writers>; Mayo Oshin, "The Daily Routine of 20 Famous Writers (and How You Can Use Them to Succeed)," *Mission.org*, August 15, 2017, <https://medium.com/the-mission/the-daily-routine-of-20-famous-writers-and-how-you-can-use-them-to-succeed-1603f52fbb77>.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Oshin, "The Daily Routine of 20 Famous Writers."

⁷⁰ Quoted in Maria Popova, "The Art of 'Creative Sleep': Stephen King on Writing and Wakeful Dreaming," *The Marginalian*, accessed January 17, 2021, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/10/14/stephen-king-on-writing-and-creative-sleep/>.

get there and not paralysed by a (again, quasi-Freudian) inner censor.⁷¹ Also frequently mentioned are very early mornings, policies around caffeine and sugar intake, turning off electronic devices, and specified writing locations like a shed or, in Angelou's case, a hotel room.⁷²

Underlying the writer's routine as a concept, I think, is a 'demystified' doctrine of writing which sees creativity as only a small part of the process which must therefore be trained or supplemented with appropriate disciplinary techniques, rather than as the mystical but unreliable star under which *all* writing must take place. Sometimes a writer's routine is explicitly designed to counter a romanticised fantasy about writing: for instance, Hani Abdurraqib reports reluctantly replacing his exciting late nights with a "hard stop" at five or six PM, in order not to drain his creative stamina.⁷³ Following a routine can be a way to reduce decision-making and the anxious wait for inspiration to strike, and to imagine creativity instead as responsive to repetition, limitation, and effort. As Henry Miller put it in his famous 'Writing Commandments', "When you can't create you can work."⁷⁴

Even more than the routines themselves, discussions and descriptions of writers' routines evince this demystifying objective. Mason Currey explains that collecting and

⁷¹ Will Self writes in 'Conrads', a term taken from Joseph Conrad's daily 800-word target; Alice Munro and Stephen King both use page count targets; and an article on the website *Now Novel* suggests ways of breaking writing work down into achievable targets: "Write 50 words today, then 100 tomorrow. Divide scenes into segments labelled 'a', 'b', 'c' and so forth, and resolve to just tackle part 'a' today." Will Self, "Will Self: 'I Write First Thing, When I Can Suspend Disbelief in the Act of Making Things Up,'" *The Guardian*, June 18, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/18/my-writing-day-will-self>; Alice Munro and Stephen King both quoted in Oshin, "The Daily Routine of 20 Famous Writers"; Bridget McNulty, "Writing Discipline: 7 Strategies to Keep Writing Your Novel," *Now Novel*, accessed September 18, 2018, <https://www.nownovel.com/blog/writing-discipline-7-strategies/>. Various apps and websites, such as Pacemaker and Storytoolz, also offer a word count tracking service, so that writers can quantify their own productivity; the advanced word processor Scrivener also has an inbuilt word count tracker, along with a 'deadline' feature which will automatically generate word count targets.

⁷² *The Guardian's* 'My Writing Day' articles convey the range of relatively mundane approaches (unlike the more extreme and often historical examples in Mason Currey and Celia Blue Johnson's anthologies) taken by contemporary writers to: early mornings (Bettany Hughes, Lemn Sissay, Howard Jacobson); caffeine and food (Ian Rankin, Anthony Horowitz, Elizabeth Strout); writing spaces (Douglas Coupland, Deborah Levy, Helen Dunmore, Louis de Bernières); and technology (Anne Enright, Charlotte Mendelson, Tracey Chevalier, Lisa McNerney)—as well as other factors like music, writing implements, how the writer gets going, and so on. See *The Guardian*, "My Writing Day," *The Guardian*, accessed August 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/my-writing-day>, and subsidiary pages.

⁷³ Hanif Abdurraqib and Brandon Stosuy, "Hanif Abdurraqib on the Writer as Archivist," *The Creative Independent*, December 19, 2017, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/hanif-abdurraqib-on-the-writer-as-archivist/>.

⁷⁴ Henry Miller, *Henry Miller on Writing*, ed. Thomas H. Moore (New York, NY: New Directions, 1964), 161.

anthologising the daily routines of great artists and thinkers helped him to see how “grand creative visions translate to small daily increments”;⁷⁵ Currey quotes, for instance, Joyce Carol Oates’s explanation of her prodigious output as the result of ‘simple’ hard work.⁷⁶ For Andrew Cowan, an interest in writers’ routines is equivalent to asking a decorator which solvents and brushes they prefer, suggesting he sees the routine as part of technical discussions about how to manage the ‘raw material’ of writing, as a decorator mixes and applies paint.⁷⁷ Elsewhere, Bridget McNulty asserts, “Writing discipline isn’t mythical or something you simply either have or don’t. Organisation, writing structure and a sound plan keep you focused”;⁷⁸ and Maya Oshin argues that tabulating the routines of others gives insight into why those individuals become successful: “Yes, the top one percent of performers in any field are usually born with natural talent but [...] [w]hen we study them carefully, we notice a common pattern across the board—an incredibly efficient daily routine that keeps them miles ahead of the pack”.⁷⁹ In places, descriptions of routines take an explicitly quantitative approach: *The Guardian*’s ‘My Writing Day’ column sometimes included writers’ own humorous statistics about their working hours, coffee intake, and so on; and at the apex, perhaps, of this statistical approach is an impressive graphic commissioned in 2020 for the website *The Marginalian* which visualises the relationship between the time various famous writers got up and their success in terms of books published and prizes won.⁸⁰ The theory or doctrine of writing which underlies discipline in these accounts is thoroughly un-mysterious, not something involving enforced deference to an unpredictable creative force, but more akin to physical fitness, a matter of regularity and technique.⁸¹ There is a sense of a ‘science’ of creativity, or what William James disparagingly termed “medical materialism”: the notion that all states of mind,

⁷⁵ Currey, Introduction to *Daily Rituals* (n.p.).

⁷⁶ Oates: “I have acquired the reputation over the years of being prolix when in fact I am measured against people who *simply* don’t work as hard or as long.” Quoted in Currey, 63 (my emphasis).

⁷⁷ Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction*, 5.

⁷⁸ McNulty, “Writing Discipline.”

⁷⁹ Oshin, “The Daily Routine of 20 Famous Writers.”

⁸⁰ Maria Popova, “Famous Writers’ Sleep Habits vs. Literary Productivity, Visualised,” *The Marginalian*, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/12/16/writers-wakeup-times-literary-productivity-visualization/>.

⁸¹ Christopher Smith explicitly compares the building of discipline through repetition to muscle training in two articles: “Exercising Your Writing Muscles During Self-Isolation,” *Writing Place*, March 22, 2020, <http://www.writingplace.co.uk/exercising-your-writing-muscles-during-self-isolation/>; and “Inspiring And Encouraging Your Imagination,” *Writing Place*, October 24, 2013, <http://www.writingplace.co.uk/inspiring-and-encouraging-your-imagination/>.

however mysterious they might seem at first, are explicable in physiological terms, and can be evoked by ‘priming’ the brain and body in certain ways.⁸²

Writers’ routines are not merely recommended as a useful technique for practising a demystified model of writing, however: they are given a *moral* weight which brings them into the orbit of Max Weber’s account of the ‘Protestant ethic’, characteristic of capitalism, in which discipline is not only a pragmatic strategy but an *ethos*, and wasting time is a moral infraction, “the deadliest of sins”.⁸³ Thus, Maya Oshin suggests that not following a routine is likely to lead to what she condemns as “[u]nfinished and half-baked work, mindless wasteful time spent on the internet”.⁸⁴ Cowan suggests a questionnaire a writer can use to assess their own “timewasting” tendencies; his categories—fiddling, distractions, stalling, dreaming, skiving and absconding—suggest that not writing can be seen as a dereliction of duty.⁸⁵ Will Self goes further, asserting that “I’ve always been a morning writer, and frankly I believe 99% of the difficulties novices experience are as a result of their unwillingness to do the same. Narrative structure, mise en scene, characterisation—you can’t get to grips with these problems unless you’ve put the words on the page.”⁸⁶ Framing writing challenges as the result of *unwillingness*, rather than reasonable struggle in the face of difficulty, suggests again a model of discipline as the distinguishing factor that marks the ‘serious’ writer, and a lack of discipline as an indication of dilettantism or laziness. The moralisation of writerly discipline is clearly founded on a demystified model of writing in which creativity can be coaxed through discipline, and in which a lack of inspiration is therefore no longer a valid excuse for not writing.

On the other hand, the demystification of writing also takes the form of a humorous humanisation of the writer, portraying them as—rather than a genius with unbounded creativity and motivation—someone engaged in perpetual struggle with

⁸² William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature: Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York, NY: Longman, Green and Co., 1917), 13. More recently, the Adam Fetterman Lab at the University of Houston has experimented with techniques to literally prime the state of creativity (characterised by increased mental associativeness). See Kai Sassenberg et al., “Priming Creativity as a Strategy to Increase Creative Performance by Facilitating the Activation and Use of Remote Associations,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 68 (2017): 128–38.

⁸³ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), 17, 104.

⁸⁴ Oshin, “The Daily Routine of 20 Famous Writers.”

⁸⁵ Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction*, 9–10.

⁸⁶ Self, “I Write First Thing.”

their own flagging creativity and feeble powers of discipline against inevitable distractions. Scott Turow confesses, “I often wish that my desk chair was equipped with a seat belt,” and Jon McGregor self-mockingly notes, “[A]pparently I tweet 7.8 times a day, which is odd because I don’t even know what Twitter is and have total discipline as a writer.”⁸⁷ Philip Pullman spends much of his ‘My Writing Day’ entry describing various items on his desk, then draws an analogy between his unfocused description and his tendency to procrastinate during the writing itself:

I see I haven’t said anything yet about the central activity itself. Instead I’ve been taking up time talking about all the bits and pieces I have around me, and I haven’t even mentioned the magnifying glass or the Post-it notes or the worry beads. Wasting time, perhaps. Fiddling about and getting nowhere. But what else did you think writers do all day? Write?⁸⁸

The humour of failed routines thus doubles down on the demystification in these discourses of writerly discipline, showing that not only do many successful writers need to rely on a routine—on discipline rather than creativity—but they often lack the willpower to stick to it. This humanising demystification might also serve a valuable political aim, that of revealing what Sara Ahmed calls “the work done to keep the desk clear”, both literally and metaphorically.⁸⁹ Practising discipline, as I noted in my introduction, is dependent on socioeconomic circumstances: it is much easier to hold to a strict routine if the cleaning, cooking and childcare (and possibly money-earning) can be done at other times or by someone else. Historically, much of this maintenance and caring work has been done by women and servants to enable the work of a man, as encapsulated in the proverb “Behind every great man is a great woman”; and Jon McGregor observes pointedly that “I have never been asked how I juggle writing and fatherhood”, suggesting his awareness of the usual gender disparity in discourses

⁸⁷ Scott Turow, “Scott Turow: ‘My Characters, like Me, Find Society’s Problems in the Law,’” *The Guardian*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jul/22/scott-turow-my-characters-like-me-find-societys-problems-in-the-law->; Jon McGregor, “Jon McGregor: ‘I Have Never Been Asked How I Juggle Writing and Fatherhood,’” *The Guardian*, January 6, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/06/jon-mcgregor-my-writing-day>.

⁸⁸ Philip Pullman, “Philip Pullman: ‘I Use Coloured Pencils to Show Which Key I’m Writing in—D Minor, at the Moment,’” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/23/philip-pullman-writing-day-coloured-pencils>.

⁸⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 30–31.

around creative writing.⁹⁰ Making this work visible, whoever is now doing it, is therefore a move towards a very desirable sort of demystification. The writing day described by Anne Enright consists substantially of solving a crisis about house keys, doing laundry, and attending to “endless” bureaucracy; her account is more explicit about the work done to keep the desk clear than, for instance, that of Will Self, who notes in an aside that he requires “children and dogs muzzled” without acknowledging who is taking this silencing (and, presumably, caretaking) role.⁹¹ Julie Myerson, like Enright, describes the limitations on her writing time, and also highlights her husband’s role in her early writing career:

I wrote my first novel at evenings and weekends, with an office job, two babies and another one on the way. I also had debilitating back pain and often had to lie down on the floor between paragraphs. I now wonder how I did it (a husband untroubled by childcare is the honest answer).⁹²

The demystification of creative writing via honest descriptions of writers’ routines, including their struggles, contributes towards its democratisation by making visible the material conditions for staying orientated (as Ahmed puts it) towards the desk, rather than reinforcing a myth in which mysterious ‘genius’ is proven by an ability to write whatever one’s material circumstances.

However, while the demystification motive is clearly very strong in discourses around writers’ routines, so too is a current in the opposite direction, towards *remystification*. This appears in multiple forms, and sometimes even as several mutually opposing ideas, such as being compulsively dedicated but also deliberately breaking one’s own routine. Common to all these forms, however, is the retention of a doctrine of creative writing in which creativity ultimately eludes orderly

⁹⁰ McGregor, “I Have Never Been Asked.” At times the work of women ‘behind the scenes’ has even extended to wifely contributions to the writing work itself, as in the case of Virginia Woolf, who carried out enormous amounts of research for her husband Leonard’s political writings but whose contribution remained publicly unacknowledged by Leonard Woolf both before and after her death. See Michèle Barrett, “Virginia Woolf’s Research for ‘Empire and Commerce in Africa,’” *Woolf Studies Annual* 19 (2013): 109.

⁹¹ Anne Enright, “My Writing Day: Anne Enright,” *The Guardian*, April 22, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/22/anne-enright-my-writing-day>; Self, “I Write First Thing.”

⁹² Julie Myerson, “Julie Myerson: ‘I Am a Solipsistic Maniac Who Can Think of Nothing but the Book,’” *The Guardian*, December 30, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/30/julie-myerson-my-writing-day>.

management, however strict one's routine, and also remains the higher value: discipline might be a useful supplement to, or even a temporary substitute for, creativity, but can never replace it completely.

For some writers, the enduring mystery of creativity is suggested by their reports that access to creativity (or inspiration or 'flow') rarely correlates with the writing time held open by the routine, seeming rather to syncopate with it. Yaa Gyasi, for instance, uses a well-digging metaphor to illustrate the work she does to reach "the great rush of water"—a figure for 'deep' creativity with echoes of the Freudian unconscious—but states that this is not always effective: "Sometimes I dig 200ft down before coming back up, dry."⁹³ Currey notes that the composer Steve Reich "doesn't believe in waiting for inspiration to strike, but he does believe [...] that, with continual work, you can look forward to hitting these patches of inspiration from time to time", suggesting that discipline is not seen as a reliable route to inspiration or creativity, but simply as a practice which improves the odds of "hitting" it, as one might hit a seam of gold.⁹⁴ Hilary Mantel reports in her 2020 book *Mantel Pieces*, excerpted by *Literary Hub*, that two daily hours of being "on-song" are sufficient to write a book—she terms these the "golden hours"—but also that she usually works many more hours than this; "sometimes I wonder why", she muses, implying perhaps that while discipline is important to creativity, discipline *without* creativity, like works without faith, might be redundant.⁹⁵

A doctrine of writing in which mysterious creativity must ultimately trump discipline is also implied in the way some writers choose to break routines or eschew them altogether. Andrew Cowan suggests that avoiding writing through procrastination can in fact be strangely productive, that "we may even need to defer and delay for so long that we reach such a pitch of anxiety that all our excuses

⁹³ Yaa Gyasi, "Yaa Gyasi: 'I Write a Sentence. I Delete It. I Wonder If It's Too Early for Lunch,'" *The Guardian*, October 28, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/28/yaa-gyasi-my-writing-day>. Seamus Heaney uses a similar Freudian metaphor—though here the writer is lowering a bucket into an existing well, rather than digging a new one—in his 1974 lecture 'Feeling Into Words': "You are miming the real thing until one day the chain draws unexpectedly tight and you have dipped into waters that will continue to entice you back. You'll have broken the skin on the pool of yourself." Notably, he describes as "the real thing" only the moment where 'true' creativity is accessed; everything until this point is a 'mime'. See Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 47.

⁹⁴ Currey, *Daily Rituals*, 67–68.

⁹⁵ Hilary Mantel, "Hilary Mantel on How Writers Learn to Trust Themselves," *Literary Hub*, October 27, 2020, <https://lithub.com/hilary-mantel-on-how-writers-learn-to-trust-themselves/>.

metabolise into nervous energy”⁹⁶—an image which resonates with Freudian ‘economic’ psychoanalytic models in which psychic energy builds until it is converted into action. For writers such as Henry Miller and Susan Sontag, exceptions to their routines were built in, with Miller including both strict disciplinary rules *and* allowances to break these rules in his famous ‘Program’ of writing commandments:

1. Work on one thing at a time until finished.
[...]
4. Work according to Program and not according to mood. Stop at the appointed time!
5. When you can’t create you can work.
[...]
7. Keep human! See people, go places, drink if you feel like it.
[...]
9. Discard the Program when you feel like it—but go back to it next day. Concentrate. Narrow down. Exclude.
[...]
11. Write first and always. Painting, music, friends, cinema, all these come afterwards.⁹⁷

Sontag, meanwhile, specified in a list of her own writing rules how often each could be broken: “I will get up every morning no later than eight. (Can break this rule once a week.)”⁹⁸ The frequent inclusion of both Sontag and Miller’s rules in modern collections of writers’ routines suggests their compatibility with contemporary models of writing which include a strong note of exceptionalism. More recently, Roddy Doyle has described his own practice of “mitching”—playing truant from work—as “something I shouldn’t be doing but that’s doing me good”.⁹⁹ This phrase evokes the paradox that, according to this doctrine of creative writing, even a practice which is officially ‘wrong’ can be ‘right’, and discipline must always remain in service to something beyond itself, like Miller’s ‘humanity’ (“Keep human!”). On the other hand, programming these apparent ‘lapses’ from discipline, or treating them as part of the

⁹⁶ Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction*, 11.

⁹⁷ Miller, *Henry Miller on Writing*, 161. Also quoted in: Oshin, “The Daily Routine of 20 Famous Writers”; Shaun Usher, “Henry Miller’s 11 Commandments,” Lists of Note, January 31, 2012, <http://www.listsofnote.com/2012/01/henry-millers-11-commandments.html>.

⁹⁸ Quoted in “Writers on Writing: Susan Sontag,” Writers’ Inner Voices, June 25, 2015, <https://writersinnervoices.com/2015/06/25/writers-on-writing-susan-sontag/>.

⁹⁹ Roddy Doyle, “My Writing Day: Roddy Doyle: My Work Is Fuelled by Music, Mitching and Mugs of Green Tea,” *The Guardian*, September 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/09/roddy-doyle-writing-day-smile-novel>.

discipline itself—“The mistake is to see breaks as signs of your lack of writing discipline”, one article advises¹⁰⁰—means that this exceptionalism becomes a quantified, planned, demystified part of writerly discipline, a way to nourish the inaccessible force of creativity in a deliberate and controlled way—a return, perhaps, to Jack Block’s “adaptively responsive variability”, where good discipline involves knowing when *not* to be disciplined. Even Brandon Taylor, who appears to dismiss the idea of a routine on the basis that one is making “art” (“Nothing to be gained from trying to min/max your way to creating art. It’s [...] not a dietary regimen”) seems to backtrack slightly from this in his performatively ‘simple’ recommendation of a routine: “But I think, if there’s a certain time of day you personally feel most productive, then, that’s when you should write.”¹⁰¹ Remystification thus exists in an ambiguous dynamic with demystification in these discourses, and discipline similarly with its underlying doctrines of writing and creativity; although in Doyle’s case it is the sense of transgression, the very exceptionality of lapses in discipline, that do him good, creativity is always susceptible to being programmed.

I have noted that rehumanising the writer through making their struggles visible is one form of demystification. Common in remystifying accounts, conversely, is a suggestion that some writers have such superhuman creative motivation that no discipline is required, or even that discipline is necessary to serve the opposite purpose: stopping writing. James Clear quotes the novelist Barbara Kingsolver in such a ‘humblebrag’ mode: “It’s a funny thing: people often ask how I discipline myself to write. I can’t begin to understand the question. For me, the discipline is turning off the computer and leaving my desk to do something else.”¹⁰² Andrew Michael Hurley notes dramatically that “Some days I don’t look up until my wife texts me from the house to tell me to come and eat”, implying that his creative motivation can override even basic physical needs.¹⁰³ Julie Myerson, meanwhile, reports that while she needs a clear desk to work, she has perfect, almost unbreakable focus when this is achieved (“Once I start, my concentration is absolute. Nothing distracts me. All my working life I’ve had to set

¹⁰⁰ McNulty, “Writing Discipline.”

¹⁰¹ Literary Hub and Brandon Taylor, “Brandon Taylor: Writer’s Block Is Not Tragic (It’s a Part of Life),” Literary Hub, June 22, 2021, <https://lithub.com/brandon-taylor-writers-block-is-not-tragic-its-a-part-of-life/>.

¹⁰² Quoted in Clear, “The Daily Routines of 12 Famous Writers.”

¹⁰³ Andrew Michael Hurley, “Andrew Michael Hurley: ‘Some Days I Don’t Look up until My Wife Texts to Tell Me to Eat,’” The Guardian, October 21, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/21/andrew-michael-hurley-my-writing-day>.

alarms to prise me from my writing trance”), and that she becomes compulsive and obsessed in the later stages of a project, barely able to buy Christmas presents for her family (“Now I am mad, distracted, terrible to live with, a solipsistic maniac who can think of nothing but the book”).¹⁰⁴ This is echoed by Will Self, who asserts that towards the end of a project he needs “up to 16 hours a day in complete purdah” (though he admits this might be an “indulgence” which could be trained away).¹⁰⁵ Alice Munro’s statement that “I am so compulsive that I have a quota of pages” in her 1994 *Paris Review* interview strikingly demonstrates how even a typical ‘disciplined’ practice like a page quota can be described in the terms of indiscipline—that, as I noted in my introduction, discipline and compulsion are not reliably distinguishable, and can blur together.¹⁰⁶

This tension between demystifying and remystifying descriptions of writing is particularly active when it comes to the question of whether creative writing counts as a form of *work*. I noted, like Barthes and Dawson, the incorporation of the “work-value” in models of creative writing, but this seems to have only been uneasily assimilated, and an anxiety is frequently perceptible in the way writers slip between a more romanticised, ‘vocational’ model of writing as motivated by inspiration (or compulsion), and a more pragmatic ‘work’-centred model in which writing is motivated by strong discipline (“If you can’t create you can work”). Either model, it should be noted, risks accusations of self-indulgence: if writing is a vocation or hobby, writers can be criticised for not getting a ‘real’ job; but characterising it as work might provoke pointed comparisons with other, more physically demanding forms of labour. Sometimes writers use humour or self-contradiction to hedge their bets: Andrew Michael Hurley, for instance, jokes (or half-jokes) that his intense work ethic is a product of “the northerner in me [...] that can’t quite admit that writing is a proper job”;¹⁰⁷ the poet David Harsent ambiguously asserts, “I never want—nor allow myself—time off”,¹⁰⁸ and Susan Hill wonders about the implications of her newly

¹⁰⁴ Myerson, “I Am a Solipsistic Maniac.”

¹⁰⁵ Self, “I Write First Thing.”

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Oshin, “The Daily Routine of 20 Famous Writers.”

¹⁰⁷ Hurley, “Some Days I Don’t Look Up.”

¹⁰⁸ David Harsent, “David Harsent: ‘After a Night’s Sleep There Are Dreams to Transcribe—Their Images Endure,’” *The Guardian*, December 2, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/02/david-harsent-my-writing-day>.

relaxed routine, asking, “Can I be a serious writer, keeping such casual hours?”¹⁰⁹ Occasionally this uncertainty about whether writing is work appears in writers’ uncertainty about whether writing *hurts*, which for Elaine Scarry is a key attribute of work.¹¹⁰ Rose Tremain exemplifies this, performing a kind of double austerity followed by an immediate qualification, and slipping in a single paragraph between models of writing as vocation or as difficult work: “Sometimes, work does feel punishingly arduous, but let’s not be too self-pitying about it [...] The fact is I love doing it”.¹¹¹ Ray Bradbury, likewise, has declared contradictory opinions at different times about whether writing is work. In *Zen in the Art of Writing* (1990) he says, “Let’s take a long look at that faintly repellent word WORK. It is, above all, the word about which your career will revolve for a lifetime.” Ten years after this book was published, however, Bradbury addressed a writers’ symposium with the opposite argument:

Writing is not a serious business. It’s a joy and a celebration. You should be having fun at it. Ignore the authors who say, oh my god, what work, oh Jesus Christ, you know. No, to hell with that. It is not work. If it’s work, stop it, and do something else.¹¹²

Discussions of writerly discipline, particularly the writer’s routine, thus provide a space in which to stage and assert, simultaneously, models of writing both as mysteriously effortless, and as non-mysterious work. One might speculate that writers’ anxiety to prove their own austere work ethic arises in response to a wider cultural narrative which perpetually suspects writers (and artists in general) of narcissistic self-indulgence, and thus paradoxically requires both that writers experience writing as work and that they feel unable to complain about it. Describing one’s own routine enables the performance of a kind of strategic ‘seriousness’ or ‘professionalism’ to others, something which is felt as absent if no routine is present—hence Susan Hill’s performative uncertainty about whether she counts as a “serious” writer. On the other

¹⁰⁹ Susan Hill, “Susan Hill: ‘Can I Be a Serious Writer, Keeping Such Casual Hours?,’” *The Guardian*, February 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/25/susan-hill-my-writing-day>.

¹¹⁰ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985), 171.

¹¹¹ Rose Tremain, “Rose Tremain: Truth, Insomnia and Waiting for Inspiration in Norwich John Lewis,” *The Guardian*, May 28, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/28/my-writing-day-rose-tremain>.

¹¹² Both quoted in Emily Temple, “Ray Bradbury’s Greatest Writing Advice,” *Literary Hub*, August 22, 2018, <https://lithub.com/ray-bradburys-greatest-writing-advice/>.

hand, the ambivalence or anxiety I have identified may also mask a collective strategy whereby writers situate their job both as a serious, professional, demystified “proper job”—that is, legible in capitalist terms—and simultaneously preserve it from the category of ‘mere labour’ by emphasising their intense devotion to their own practice.

Alongside the ambiguous presence of the ‘work-value’, the way accounts of writers’ practices continue to highlight or celebrate an element of ‘undisciplined’ devotion or compulsion indicates, I think, that discourses of writerly discipline still retain a concept of mysterious ‘genius’ which is marked by a creativity so constant and productive it does not need coaxing through discipline—or even a discipline so total it has become somehow synonymous with creativity. A 2017 parody of a writer’s routine published in *The New Yorker* captures this latter ambiguity:

I don’t really have a ‘process,’ per se, just a simple routine that I meticulously follow every day like a disciplined genius robot. [...] It’s all about repetition, really—doing the same thing every single day. [...] Because I, a human being, have the self-control to maintain this routine in a complete vacuum of social interaction or any positive reinforcement.¹¹³

The phrase “disciplined genius robot”, and the implication that the discipline is magically self-maintaining without any supplementary effort, show how, in accounts of writers’ routines, discipline can become absorbed into genius or creativity in a remystifying doctrine which holds that if no ‘natural’ self-discipline arises from one’s innate creativity—if writing is always experienced as difficult ‘work’—then no amount of ‘willed’ self-discipline will be sufficient. Ultimately, the relationship between mysterious creativity and unmysterious discipline in discussions of writers’ routines is one of shifting ambiguities: not only can creativity be programmed and coaxed, but a writer’s capacity for discipline can itself be mysterious.

¹¹³ Hallie Cantor, “The Writer’s Process,” *The New Yorker*, May 29, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/29/the-writers-process>.

“Kill your darlings”:

Editing and the duty of reduction

The second major theme in discourses of writerly discipline is the practice of editing and the kind of stylistics to which disciplined writers should aspire. While these discourses sometimes present themselves as ‘craft’ advice—that is, serving neutral technical aims—in fact they often implicitly appeal to a version of discipline that sees editing as a way to exercise moral strength: careful and painstaking revision, John Gardner says in his influential writing handbook, is “[w]hat the *honest* writer does”.¹¹⁴ Julian Gough’s description of his writing practice suggests that editing is the particular point at which the “uncensored and unspellchecked” licence of the first draft is brought into order; during editing, he reports, he takes on a role akin to a Freudian superego and reminiscent of Lakoff’s Strict Father Morality: “I’m more like a stern foster parent to a troubled child. It needs discipline and hard work.”¹¹⁵ Frequently, as I shall show, editing advice consists of ways to *reduce* the text that was previously produced by the discipline of a routine, on the basis that this writing is likely to be excessive, messy, or even ‘dirty’ in some way: the doctrine underlying this discipline seems to be that a writer risks moral negligence if she fails to edit out these faults, often through highly specific editing rules which are widespread in extra-mural creative writing discourse. Discipline here is less about overcoming creativity’s absence or unreliability, and more about retrospectively curbing it, reducing its inevitably self-indulgent excess. Although an intention towards the demystification of creativity, followed by its remystification, is again visible—many of these editing discussions also contain a kind of disclaimer encouraging the writer to keep the ‘life’ in their writing and to do what feels ‘right’—I will focus in this section on showing how the discourses of editing and stylistics are frequently moralised to suggest that indiscipline during this stage of the process leads to writing which is not only bad, but offensive.

One striking feature of discussions of editing is that cutting out is much more often discussed than adding in: it is assumed that the discipline of editing lies in

¹¹⁴ John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* (New York, NY: Random House, 1985), 114 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁵ Julian Gough, “How To Edit Your Own Lousy Writing,” *The Stinging Fly*, October 24, 2017, <https://stingingfly.org/2017/10/24/edit-lousy-writing/>.

reduction. The justification for this is often implied via sets of subtly moralised binaries, sometimes with their opposites only implied; the commonest are clean/dirty, necessary/redundant, [valuable]/rubbish, cleared/[messy], clear/[vague], and tough love/self-indulgence. (Imagining an alternative set of binaries which are moralised in the opposite direction and which might necessitate the addition of *more* material, such as rich/sterile or complex/simplistic, makes this moral valorisation of conciseness and brevity clear.) Perhaps the commonest assumption in discussions of editing is that, as in the doctrine of Imagism and the editing practices of Ezra Pound a century earlier, simply excising words from a draft is a virtue in itself. For Hilary Mantel, for instance, “Compression is the first grace of style and takes hard labour. Your best days are sometimes those when you end up with less on the page than when you started.”¹¹⁶ Julie Myerson and Ayòbámi Adébáyò, similarly, both mention that they ideally end their writing days having cut, rather than added, words;¹¹⁷ and Ray Bradbury uses several of the binaries I listed above in a description of how he cut a 150,000-word draft by a third: “It’s important to *get out of your own way*. *Clean* the kindling away, the *rubbish*. Make it *clear*.”¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, an article by Alice Underwood entitled ‘11 Tips to Clean Up Your Dirty, Wordy Writing’ highlights both the clean/dirty and the necessary/ redundant binaries, justifying the latter in terms of “dignity”: “the dignity of writing is also due to slashing what you want to say down to what you *need* to say”.¹¹⁹ Joslyn Pine and Joanna Penn similarly encourage writers to remove “redundancies” in their writing (Penn further refers to these redundancies as “junk”), and Lisa O’Donnell specifies that when she is editing, “the first thing I look to remove is description and unnecessary dialogue”.¹²⁰ If an aesthetic mode is present here, it is

¹¹⁶ Mantel, “How Writers Learn to Trust Themselves.” Mantel’s use of *grace* recalls the term’s use in Renaissance aesthetic theory, in which grace can refer to an artist’s ability to conceal the painstaking effort and meticulous skill which have gone into its creation. Mantel’s perhaps ironical implication is that the artistic virtue which seems most ‘unaskable’, like creativity, is in fact the result of the most basic form of “hard labour”. See Ita Mac Carthy, “Grace,” in *Renaissance Keywords*, ed. Ita Mac Carthy (Leeds: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 71–75.

¹¹⁷ Myerson, “I Am a Solipsistic Maniac”; Ayòbámi Adébáyò, “Ayòbámi Adébáyò: ‘Writing a Sentence Can Transport Me to Another World,’” *The Guardian*, December 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/09/ayobami-adebayo-my-writing-day>.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Temple, “Ray Bradbury’s Greatest Writing Advice” (my emphases).

¹¹⁹ Alice E. Underwood, “11 Tips to Clean Up Your Dirty, Wordy Writing,” *Grammarly Blog*, February 17, 2017, <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/clean-up-your-writing/> (emphasis in original).

¹²⁰ “Joslyn Pine on Editing Fiction,” *Creative Writing Now*, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.creative-writing-now.com/editing-fiction.html>; Joanna Penn, “Writing And Editing Fiction: 7 Things To Fix In Your First Self-Edit,” *The Creative Penn*, October 22, 2015, <https://www.thecreativepenn.com/2015/10/22/self-editing/>; Lisa O’Donnell, “Editing Your Novel: Lisa

one of necessity and hygiene, implying that anything deemed to be excessive in the text will ‘dirty’ and ‘degrade’ it. Further, since no creative writing is technically ‘necessary’, this aesthetic mode tends absurdly towards the complete extinction of writing, a mode in which the best proof of discipline would be not to write at all.

This kind of moralised language and imagery has long been common in Anglo-American discussions of creative writing and stylistics. One can point here to the influence of writing handbooks like William Strunk Jr’s *The Elements of Style* (1918), originally written to accompany American college composition classes and since revised and reissued in three subsequent editions (1959, 1979, 2000), suggesting that despite its age it retains contemporary currency. E.B. White, who expanded the original for the 1959 edition, describes the book as a “summation of the case for cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English”, reiterating the idea of stylistic ‘hygiene’.¹²¹ Strunk’s general argument is that “Vigorous writing is concise”: he characterises the style he favours as “plain”, “definite” and “direct”, and that against which his advice is meant to protect as “tame, colourless, hesitating, non-committal language”.¹²² One of his rules, “Omit needless words,” is explicated by a kind of stylistic manifesto which doubles down on the necessary/redundant binary:

A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that he make every word tell.¹²³

The almost compulsive repetition of “needless” and “unnecessary” seems only to highlight how meaningless a dictum this is; as Geoffrey Pullum, critiquing the book on the second edition’s 50th anniversary, observes, “The students who know which words are needless don’t need the instruction.”¹²⁴

O’Donnell on Cutting and Crafting,” Curtis Brown Creative, June 29, 2017, <https://www.curtisbrowncreative.co.uk/edit-your-novel-lisa-o-donnell/>.

¹²¹ E. B. White, Introduction to William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th ed. (London: Pearson, 2000), xiii.

¹²² Strunk and White, 23, 19.

¹²³ Strunk and White, 23.

¹²⁴ Geoffrey K. Pullum, “50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 17, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160403075606/http://chronicle.com/article/50-Years-of-Stupid-Grammar/25497>. Pullum, a linguistics scholar, also demonstrates various errors in Strunk and

The insistence on efficient, ‘plain’ style achieved through excision has become codified in several writing ‘rules’—particularly the avoidance of adverbs and the passive voice, a preference for *said* over other dialogue tags, and the slogan *Show don’t tell*—which are now extremely widespread, and which are often justified in moral rather than aesthetic terms. Ryan Van Cleave expresses surprise at “how many writers assert that they value the written word in its highest form, yet they *can’t be bothered* to avoid passive voice”.¹²⁵ Van Cleave bases his argument for the active voice on its sounding more “exciting” and “interesting”; Alice Underwood’s article, more relevantly, cites George Orwell’s essay ‘Politics and the English Language’, which argues that the passive voice enables a shirking of syntactic and thus moral responsibility. Stephen King, meanwhile, who is identified (by Underwood and Van Cleave, amongst others) as the originator of the ‘no adverbs’ rule, gives a justification of this policy in a passage of his memoir which is saturated with moralised language:

Someone out there is now accusing me of being tiresome and anal-retentive. I deny it. I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they’re like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day . . . fifty the day after that . . . and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are, but by then it’s—*GASP!!*—too late.¹²⁶

King’s hyperbolic, sermonising style and his ironic trio of adverbs clearly indicate his humorous tone; yet his dandelion metaphor is revealing, since dandelions are only “weeds” by dint of a moveable, cultural boundary between acceptable and unacceptable plants not unlike that between acceptable and unacceptable classes of words (and between disciplined and undisciplined actions). Moreover, the ‘profligacy’

White’s knowledge of grammar, and that in fact they frequently break their own rules. He labels the book a “toxic mix of purism, atavism, and personal eccentricity”. Yet its regular reissuing both demonstrates and ensures that it retains contemporary currency, and in 2011 *Time* magazine named *The Elements of Style* one of the “best and most influential” nonfiction books in English since 1923. See Erin Skarda, “All-TIME 100 Nonfiction Books: Elements of Style,” *Time*, August 16, 2011, <https://entertainment.time.com/2011/08/30/all-time-100-best-nonfiction-books/slide/elements-of-style-by-strunk-and-white/>.

¹²⁵ Ryan G. Van Cleave, “The Top 10 Golden Rules of Self-Editing,” *The Writer*, August 20, 2019, <https://www.writermag.com/improve-your-writing/revision-grammar/self-editing/> (my emphasis).

¹²⁶ Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2020), 125.

attributed to dandelions in King's analogy does not easily transfer to adverbs, since they are not living organisms and lack reproductive agency; the implication, therefore, is of moral 'looseness' in the writer, a lack of self-control, if she 'allows' adverbs to 'invade' her work.

From a literary-critical viewpoint, it is troubling how regularly these codified editing rules are invoked and how repeatedly they are moralised to suggest that only undisciplined, self-indulgent, deluded writers would allow messiness and redundancy in their writing. As well as encouraging writers not to make full use of the resources of their own language, this codification collapses questions of style and aesthetics into a matter of efficiency, moral discipline, and even accessibility. This blurring between categories which surely ought to be kept distinct is perhaps most extremely demonstrated by the website *Hemingway Editor*, which uses an automated algorithm to identify adverbs, long sentences, the passive voice, Latinate vocabulary, and other writing 'profligacies' in a writer's text so that they can be edited out; the algorithm gives one's text a grade rating matched to American school grades (Grade 9, age 13-14, is recommended for ideal "readability").¹²⁷ The suggestion that Hemingway's merit somehow lay in these (literally) programmable rules implies a dismissal of the relationship between literary form and content, and a wholesale departure from any genuinely aesthetic mode. Put another way, disciplined editing comes to resemble Max Weber's description of bureaucracy, which he saw as fundamental to capitalism because of its consistency and predictability, and more useful to capitalism the more it "depersonalises" itself—"i.e., the more completely it succeeds in achieving the exclusion of love, hatred, and every purely personal [...] feeling from the execution of official tasks."¹²⁸

Weber's mention of love is apposite, since, as well as asserting rules around specific stylistic features, the discourses of editing are also explicit in advocating an ascetic practice of discipline largely involving the repudiation of the writer's pleasure and love. Here, the writer must excise the parts of her writing to which she is most emotionally attached: one must be "ruthless", and edit with a "scythe", in Lisa O'Donnell's words.¹²⁹ The oft-cited slogan *Kill your darlings* is a particularly popular

¹²⁷ "Hemingway Editor," accessed August 14, 2020, <http://www.hemingwayapp.com>.

¹²⁸ Quoted in Elizabeth Kolbert, "Why Work? A Hundred Years of 'The Protestant Ethic,'" *The New Yorker*, November 29, 2004, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/11/29/why-work>.

¹²⁹ O'Donnell, "Editing Your Novel."

and memorable summation of this type of discipline. Originally “Murder your darlings”, an injunction given by Arthur Quiller-Couch as a way of avoiding “extraneous Ornament” in literary style,¹³⁰ the slogan was later adopted by William Faulkner, and more recently by Stephen King, who expands it into the somewhat vituperative injunction, “[K]ill your darlings, kill your darlings, kill your darlings, even when it breaks your egocentric little scribbler’s heart, kill your darlings.”¹³¹ An article on the website *Daily Writing Tips* softens the phrase further, to “Say no to your darlings”, but also makes explicit the latent misogyny in this phrase by personifying the ‘darling’ as a “cute” and “precious” daughter who nevertheless does not “really belong” in your book (another appeal to the necessary/redundant binary).¹³² Keeping the darling in the text, the article suggests, would be “selfish”, suggesting that the writer should subordinate her own preferences to an imagined sense of what readers will wish her writing to include or exclude.

Critiques of *Kill your darlings* already exist: Jeannette Ng posted a multi-tweet attack on the slogan in 2018, arguing that it favours (like the Hemingway Editor) a particular ‘efficient realist’ mode of prose fiction, which she describes as “fast-paced fast-reading prose good for racing through plots” with “a great sense of immediacy”. Ng notes the commonest pieces of advice in all-caps—“NO ADVERBS! [...] PASSIVE VOICE IS BAD! [...] SHOW DON’T TELL!”—conveying the widespread and dogmatic power these rules, in her view, have taken on. She also identifies the moral implications behind the privileging of this particular mode of fiction, linking her thread to a tweet by R.B. Lemberg which describes this mode as “lean, mean [...] muscular prose”¹³³ (another moralised binary: lean/flabby), and concludes that ‘Kill your darlings’ disguises an ideology which states that

we shouldn’t allow ourselves to have too much fun when writing fictional worlds.

That if the prose is serving the writer, it cannot possibly be serving the reader or the story.

¹³⁰ Arthur Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Writing*, Pocket Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 203.

¹³¹ King, *On Writing*, 222.

¹³² “Say No To Your Darlings,” *Daily Writing Tips*, accessed August 13, 2020, <https://www.dailywritingtips.com/say-no-to-your-darlings/>.

¹³³ R.B. Lemberg, “I Hate the Phrase ‘Kill Your Darlings,’” *Twitter*, June 10, 2018, https://twitter.com/RB_Lemberg/status/1005869359473025024.

That no one wants to see you show off.¹³⁴

Although Ng's characterisation of *Kill your darlings* seems extreme, one can see the troubling ideology she describes implied in, for instance, a review by Justin Cartwright of Margaret Atwood's 2013 novel *MaddAddam*. Cartwright describes the book as "written with admirable energy and bravura", but nonetheless reports "a nagging sense that what is supposed to be a richly imagined dystopia is, in fact, a rather overburdened and undisciplined indulgence."¹³⁵ The last two words suggest most strongly that when reviewers make a judgment of a book's quality, especially its style or the level of detail included, an additional *moral* judgment is being made of the writer's powers of self-discipline (since a text cannot, strictly, be disciplined or undisciplined). If Atwood's stylistic "bravura" is most easily read as self-indulgence, an attachment to 'showing off' (as Ng puts it) rather than killing one's darlings, this explains the suspicion attached to modes of literature that do not follow the doctrine of the 'strictly necessary', the idea that (as Lisa O'Donnell puts it) "anything that mutes your story must be buried".¹³⁶ As George Lakoff notes in *Moral Politics*, the prioritisation of self-discipline in Strict Father Morality is predicated on a fear of becoming (or allowing) the sinful Other:¹³⁷ this fear, visibly threaded through discourses of writerly discipline, suggests that Lakoff's Strict Father Morality might indeed be a troublingly accurate model for the moralisation of creativity management in this corpus of texts.

These discourses, however, do occasionally show themselves anxious to avoid an entirely 'demystified' model of writing dominated by stylistic rules and the repudiation of pleasure. As with writers' routines, there are moments of exceptionalism in discussions of editing which suggest that ultimately writers must serve a more mysterious model in which the risk and individualism of creativity remain the highest values. This is particularly conspicuous in the way some of the commentators I have cited discuss *fear*, which, perhaps surprisingly considering the

¹³⁴ All from Jeannette Ng, "Let's Talk KILL YOUR DARLINGS and Other Such Self-Censoring Self-Limiting Rules about Writing," Twitter, June 10, 2018, https://twitter.com/jeannette_ng/status/1005759385950441472.

¹³⁵ Justin Cartwright, "MaddAddam by Margaret Atwood—Review," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/08/maddaddam-by-margaret-atwood-review>.

¹³⁶ O'Donnell, "Editing Your Novel."

¹³⁷ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 383.

general message of moral vigilance, is universally condemned. Strunk warns, as I noted above, against “tame” and “hesitating” language, Gardner suggests that poor style might emanate from the writer’s “awkwardness that comes of inexperience and timidity”, and King also sees adverbs as a sign of “timidity”, adding, “I’m convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing”.¹³⁸ Van Cleave, recommending *said* over other verbs, argues this as an issue of ‘trusting’ the language, though he also illustrates *Show don’t tell* by replacing the simple sentence “He hated his neighbour” with a long and complicated fantasy about the neighbour sliding down a razor blade, suggesting that some categories of language are to be ‘trusted’ and other simple, direct words (like *hated*) are not. These injunctions against fear and towards ‘trust’ create a slightly comical situation in which writers are repeatedly told to be alert to ‘redundant’ or ‘dirty’ forms of language, but also to be less fearful. Gardner also admits that “Any fool can revise until nothing stands out as risky, everything feels safe—and dead”¹³⁹—again performing the retention of mystery at the heart of the creative process, and even suggesting, like some Romantic literary theorists and more modern ‘humblebraggers’, that if a writer is blessed with ‘true’ creativity (rather than being “any fool”) she can feel free to ignore disciplinary restraints and craft rules altogether, in order to preserve the ‘life’ of the text. The ambiguities, even ambivalences, I identified in discourses around writers’ routines are echoed here: writers should kill their darlings, but avoid killing their text in the process.

*

Discourses of writerly discipline, then, like earlier mainstream Anglo-American models of creative writing, advocate discipline as an essential supplement or substitute for creativity, justified as both demystifying pragmatism (“If you can’t create you can work”) and as a form of moralised self-denial to ensure the writer does not indulge herself (“anything that mutes your story must be buried”). At the same time, discipline often remains ultimately subordinate to creativity, which, in its fullest realisation, negates the need for discipline altogether; the mark of the true ‘genius’ might in fact

¹³⁸ Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, 101; King, *On Writing*, 125. Somewhat contradictorily, King adds, “Good writing is often about letting go of fear and affectation. Affectation itself, beginning with the need to define some sorts of writing as ‘good’ and other sorts as ‘bad,’ is fearful behaviour.”

¹³⁹ Gardner, *The Art of Fiction*, 124.

be a creative mania (“the discipline is turning off the computer and leaving my desk to do something else”). Coleridge’s “interpenetration of passion and of will” model is in evidence here; so too is a blend of Lakoff’s Strict Father and Nurturant Parent moralities. A writer should exercise and build her writing discipline through the repetitions of a routine; but equally it is important that she stop working sometimes, to nourish her own mysterious creativity; it is also selfish for her to take too much pleasure in the writing and not to rigorously self-edit; simultaneously, however, she should trust the language she chooses rather than giving in to timidity and editing her writing until it is dead. Discipline and creativity are thus set in a constantly shifting relationship which sometimes resembles a dialectic and sometimes a non-resolvable ambivalence. Discipline is essential—but, as with the writer who is compulsively creative enough to render her routine unnecessary, or who chooses to break it for the sake of her ‘humanity’, the true ‘life’ of literature might exist in what remains risky, uncontrolled and unsubjected to the discipline of craft.

I turn next to an exploration of some of these ambivalences as they are illuminated by, and also present in, the work of Sigmund Freud. I have highlighted during the course of my analysis moments where discourses of writerly discipline seem to invoke pseudo-Freudian models of the ‘deep’ unconscious, analogies between dreaming and writing, and the opposition of an ‘uncensored’ drafting process to the sternly regulated, superego-dominated editing stage. This Freudian legacy is in fact pervasive in these discourses, and has been for many decades, from Dorothea Brande’s *Becoming a Writer* (1934) and Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way* (1991), to Andrew Cowan’s recommendation of free writing as a way to access “the stuff of your unconscious”,¹⁴⁰ the depth metaphors of Yaa Gyasi’s well-digging, and the internalised parent/child (or superego/id) structure implied by *Kill your darlings*. In places it is even suggested that writerly discipline should facilitate a kind of direct access to the unconscious, as in Julian Gough’s advice for writers working on a first draft to “jam open the fire door between your conscious and unconscious mind, and let it all out”¹⁴¹—something which most scholarly readers of Freud would strenuously deny.

¹⁴⁰ Cowan, *The Art of Writing Fiction*, 34.

¹⁴¹ Gough, “How To Edit Your Own Lousy Writing.”

Dorothea Brande and Julia Cameron also depend on the idea of a ‘trainable’ unconscious. Brande asserts that “The unconscious must flow freely and richly, bringing *at demand* all the treasures of

On the other hand, Freud himself actually displays some surprising inconsistencies in his discussions of creative writing. While continually positioning psychoanalysis as a project of demystification, he is also strikingly steadfast in his refusal to thoroughly explore the writing process, and clearly determined to preserve the mystery of creativity and writing. As I shall demonstrate, the gestures of demystification and remystification I identified in contemporary discourses may in fact be a particularly strong—and so far unremarked—point of similarity, a kind of gestural or strategic echo, between Freud’s own work and the discourses which invoke his theories. Freud’s idiosyncratic take on the dynamics of discipline and creative writing, and the way these form a continuum with discourses of writerly discipline, will therefore be the focus of my next chapter.

memory, all the emotions, incidents, scenes, imitations of character and relationship which it has stored away in its depths; the conscious mind must control, combine and discriminate between these materials without hampering the unconscious flow.” See Dorothea Brande, *Becoming a Writer* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 43, my emphasis.

Cameron, meanwhile, advocates the practice of daily “morning pages” (free writing) to train writers to evade the “Censor”, whom she describes as “our own internalised perfectionist, a nasty internal and eternal critic”. The work *censor* clearly echoes Freud’s early term for the unconscious work of repression; unlike Freud, however, Cameron is suggesting that the contents of the unconscious can somehow be made conscious and trained or altered. See Julia Cameron, *The Artist’s Way: A Course in Discovering and Recovering Your Creative Self* (London: Souvenir Press, 2020), 11.

“That strange being, the creative writer ...”

Freudian Abdications and the Mystery of Creative Writing

In my previous chapter I noted repeated casual appeals in discourses of writerly discipline to the structures and imagery of Freudian psychoanalysis. This includes the presence, sometimes implicit, of a popular model of creative writing in which a writer can directly access her unconscious, even training it to become accessible through a consistent, disciplined practice (like a routine) which serves to weaken one’s inner censor. In fact this model, as Abi Curtis has shown, is even more widespread than in the texts I examined, and is in fact pervasive throughout creative writing manuals of the twentieth and early twenty-first century.¹⁴² As I noted in my previous chapter, and as Curtis points out, this model is a distortion of one of the founding principles of psychoanalysis, which states that the unconscious can never be open to direct access, even with ‘training’, since censorship is also an unconscious mechanism which cannot be switched off at will. The contents of the unconscious instead express themselves, according to Freudian precepts, via processes of repression and sublimation which are impossible to control or fully understand, and accounts of creative writing which suggest otherwise are based not on a minor misreading of Freud but a fundamental misconception of the radicality of his interventions.

Nevertheless, even some psychoanalysts seem to employ this inaccurate model, and have attracted criticism as a result: Robert Rowland Smith disparages Hannah Segal’s *Dream, Phantasy and Art* (1991) and Christopher Bollas’s *Cracking Up* (1995) for suggesting that the reduction of repression and the healing of trauma are the best ways to increase creativity. Smith argues that these authors seem to rely on

¹⁴² Abi Curtis, “Rethinking the Unconscious in Creative Writing Pedagogy,” *New Writing* 6, no. 2 (2009): 105–8.

a liberalising of Freud, a humanistic eliding of expression with freedom, where repression can be coaxed by means of therapy to step aside and allow the bounty of creation through in all its goodness. The build-up of repressive pressure must be alleviated and creativity will ensue, in a model of aesthetic production that looks innocent next to Freud's recognition of the subterfuge required for artworks to deceive the watchtower of repression.¹⁴³

Two mutually incompatible versions of Freud are in tension here: one which portrays him as an advocate of the removal of repression in favour of greater access to the creative unconscious; and a less optimistic, but perhaps more theoretically faithful, reading (favoured by Smith) in which creative writing resembles nothing so much as neurotic symptom-formation, the often repetitive ways in which repressed libidinal urges resurface, often unrecognisably, as patterns of compulsive behaviour.

In this chapter I do not intend to reach a conclusion about which psychoanalytic models of creativity and writing correlate best with Freud's theories, or to integrate these fully with psychological models of self-discipline. This is for several reasons. Firstly, Freud's predominant interest in the pathological, his ongoing uncertainty about how to locate the boundary between healthy psyches and neurotic ones, and the evolution of his theories throughout his lifetime have all combined to produce an oeuvre from which can be gleaned several (often mutually incompatible) models of how creativity arises and might be disciplined. These models tend to remain fairly abstract, at the level of theory rather than practice, with Freud thinking little about the actual process and experience of writing; it is hard, for instance, to discern what view he might actually take of how a daily routine affects creative success, despite how often this technique is recommended by others for accessing the unconscious. More seriously, in places Freud actually seems to gainsay Curtis's and Smith's corrective, more sophisticated readings of his work: he both simplifies and obscures the role of the unconscious in creative writing, even to the extent of contradicting some of the most fundamental tenets of the discipline he himself created. A close analysis of Freud's work on creative writing reveals a set of investments and biases which complicate the question not only of how creative writing works, but also of whether Freud actually *wants* to know how it works. This chapter will therefore examine some

¹⁴³ Robert Rowland Smith, *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 113.

of Freud's own tactics in his discussions of both self-discipline and creative writing, and will show his attachment to a strategy of deferral, denial and abdication. In this sense, I will argue, Freud's work actually does form a clear continuum with discourses of writerly discipline: both sets of texts display repeated gestures of demystification and remystification in their discussions of creative writing, motivated by an apparent ambivalence about whether creative writing should ever be fully explained.¹⁴⁴

I will begin my analysis by considering Freud's two main models of self-discipline—the reality principle and the superego—in terms of the relationship between discipline and art-making. The pragmatic reality principle is in operation, Freud theorises, when an individual who would otherwise be susceptible to neurosis chooses the option of art-making to satisfy his own fantasies and gain favour with others. The more compulsive superego, meanwhile, ensures the maintenance of civilisation and culture by demanding a costly sublimation of raw instinct, something about which Freud is performatively ambivalent, contradicting his own arguments and ultimately declaring himself unqualified to reach a firm conclusion. Significantly, however, in both cases Freud is keen to emphasise the 'specialness' of artists, even in spite of his scepticism about the value of art-making—a line of argument which will recur in his work.

I will then turn to Freud's specific theorisation of creative writing, particularly his essay 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1908), on which more weight of expectation has fallen than is perhaps reasonable because of its rarity as a direct treatment by Freud of creative writing. I will argue that Freud plays a deliberate *fort-da* (or possibly *da-fort*) game with the figure of the creative writer, through a series of demystifying and remystifying statements that echo those I observed in modern discourses of writerly discipline. I will show that even in his limited theorisation of creative writing Freud obfuscates the role of the unconscious, even at one point suggesting—*pace* Curtis and Smith—that the unconscious *is* in fact open to direct

¹⁴⁴ Laplanche and Pontalis gloss the Freudian meaning of *ambivalence* as a descriptor for "specific conflicts in which the positive and negative components of the emotional attitude are simultaneously in evidence and inseparable, and where they constitute a non-dialectical opposition which the subject, saying 'yes' and 'no' at the same time, is incapable of transcending." This echoes my argument in my previous chapter that discourses of writerly discipline simultaneously employ incompatible models of writing which seem not to be fully resolvable. See J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1988), 28.

access for the privileged, special figure of the writer. These inconsistencies point to a further ambivalence—which, as I shall show, endured throughout Freud’s career—about the demystification project of psychoanalysis in relation to art, most visible in a series of ‘abdications’ where he declares both himself and psychoanalysis as a whole incapable of accounting for creative writing.

I will end with a more speculative coda which addresses the ambivalence characteristic of both Freudian and my modern corpus and offers a reading of the contemporary fascination with writerly discipline, its gestures of demystification and remystification, in psychoanalytic terms. Using Peter Brooks’s psychoanalytically informed narratology and Freud’s essay ‘Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices’ (1907), I will suggest that discourses of writerly discipline might be understood as a set of ritualised ‘ceremonials’ which defend against some kind of underlying and threatening instinctual impulse by performing repeated, unfinished demystifications of writing and then reasserting the impossibility, even the undesirability, of a final unmasking. What this impulse might be, and why defences against it might be required, are questions to which I will only tentatively suggest answers.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Other ways of using Freud to investigate discourses of writerly discipline might include a reading of their focus on stylistic ‘hygiene’ in relation to Freud’s paper ‘Character and Anal Erotism’ (1908), which examines the way an early fixation on anal erotism might be transmuted into particular character traits (parsimony, orderliness and obstinacy) in adult life. Mary Douglas’s work on dirt in *Purity and Danger* (1966) might also be used to read these hygienic stylistics more closely, especially her theory that the points where a culture is particularly concerned with hygiene—in this case, for instance, a widespread suspicion of adverbs—is revealing of more general characteristics of that culture. This work might further link to, for instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on anality and shame in Henry James’s Prefaces to the New York Edition of his work (1907-9), or the body of scholarship I cited in my previous chapter on the perceived links between stylistic ornamentation and threatening femininity or queerness. See Sigmund Freud, “Character and Anal Erotism”, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953-74), vol. IX, 169-75; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 36–50, 150; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 35–65. Further references to the *Standard Edition* of Freud’s works will be given in brackets in the main text and will refer to the volume and page number.

A further possibility might be to examine theories of creative writing which employ psychoanalytic accounts of masochism, such as Anita Phillips’s *A Defence of Masochism* (1998, based on her 1995 doctoral thesis). Phillips argues that art-making is a form of ‘productive masochism’ whereby artists learn not only to tolerate the discomfort of psychical excitement generated by sublimated sexual energy, but also to enjoy it, and to transform it into art. Her account draws on Leo Bersani’s *The Freudian Body*, which famously suggests via a deconstructive reading of Freud that all sexuality is inherently masochistic: that, sexual arousal being a form of potentially damaging, dissolving excitement, “[t]he mystery of sexuality is that we seek not only to get rid of this shattering tension but also to repeat, even to increase it.” One might similarly imagine that the structuring rigours of writerly discipline might render bearable an extremely uncomfortable creative instinct. See Anita Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 44–45; Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 38–39.

“Special dispositions and gifts”:

Freudian self-discipline and art-making

Although Freud does not theorise *discipline* or *self-discipline* as terms in themselves, he was extremely interested in psychological mechanisms of regulation and self-control: he offers two models, the reality principle and the superego, for how a person learns to act against their own desires and restrict the dominance of the pleasure principle in order to ensure some better, though deferred, outcome which will satisfy it more fully. In places these models echo some of my own observations about discipline: that it is always liable to slide into its supposed opposite, indiscipline; and that it is empty of ‘content’, requiring its values to be supplied from elsewhere. Nevertheless, how these models might inform an analysis of creative writing and writerly discipline is not always clear. On one hand, Freud’s interest in unconscious psychological activity, and his on-off insistence on finding a physiological correspondence for all mental developments, mean that his work does not often linger on the *experience* of one’s own mind and conflicting desires: how a person might exercise and improve their conscious self-discipline is not a question he explores. On the other hand, his discussions of the reality principle and the superego both include accounts of how these mechanisms enable the production of art, though again these accounts remain fairly abstract, focusing on underlying psychological economies rather than the kind of experiences described in discourses of writerly discipline. Most suggestively, perhaps, whilst Freud appears to give fairly pragmatic, even pathologising, explanations of art-making, he still limits this as an option to those with “special gifts”, suggesting he still retains a partly romanticised idea of the mysterious artist.

(1) The reality principle

The reality principle, introduced by Freud in his 1911 paper ‘Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning’, is a universal and pragmatic mechanism, concerned with how to make real-world changes in order to enable the satisfaction of the pleasure principle (rather than the fulfilment of any specific values) (XII: 219-23). The reality

principle's operations, including thinking and planning, enable the psyche to create small 'bound' cathexes of (otherwise uncomfortably mobile) psychic energy in order to tolerate a higher level of tension in the system, and thus to delay the final gratification of a larger, more pleasurable energetic discharge (XII: 221). Fantasy, by contrast, directly serves the pleasure principle, not aiming to make real-world changes, and, it is implied, perhaps resulting in a lower level of overall pleasure because the pleasure-ego's aims have only been fulfilled virtually (XII: 222).

In this model, art-making offers a strategy for turning an attachment to fantasy into a real-world benefit. Having given accounts of science, organised religion, and education as ways of structuring and incentivising the deferral of gratification (XII: 223-24), Freud suggests that art essentially consists of representations of the frustrations caused by the imposition of the reality principle, and is created by someone who is actually unable to accept these demands:

Art brings about a reconciliation between the two principles [pleasure and reality] in a peculiar way. An artist is originally a man who turns away from reality because he cannot come to terms with the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction which it at first demands, and who allows his erotic and ambitious wishes full play in the life of phantasy. He finds the way back to reality, however, from this world of phantasy by making use of special gifts to mould his phantasies into truths of a new kinds, which are valued by men as precious reflections of reality. Thus in a certain fashion he actually becomes the hero, the king, the creator, or the favourite he desired to be, without following the long roundabout path of making real alterations in the external world. But he can only achieve this because other men feel the same dissatisfaction as he does with the renunciation demanded by reality, and because that dissatisfaction, which results from the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle, is itself a part of reality.

[XII: 224]

Art-making thus becomes a decidedly unromantic workaround, a substitute made by a comparatively 'feeble' psyche who is otherwise faced with not getting its demands for pleasure met. Rather than arising from the 'disciplined indiscipline' of the responsive, accessible unconscious, art in this model originates as a kind of 'undisciplined discipline,' a motivation to work which strangely results from an original, not particularly laudable indiscipline. Art-making is legible as a substitute for neurosis—or even, more radically, as a manifestation of it, the reading favoured by Robert Smith.

On the other hand, Freud strikingly declares in the very next sentence that the option of art-making is only available to those with “special gifts”. Thus, unlike pop-Freudian discourses which equate the Freudian unconscious with universal innate creativity, Freud’s model thus gives not one but two limiting factors on who becomes artists: an inability to cope with reality where others feel only frustration; and these unexplained “special gifts”, used by the artist to communicate “truths of a new kind”. Demystification, it seems, is quickly mitigated by remystification: even as Freud theorises the pragmatism of the reality principle and seems to pathologise art-making—or at least to puncture its romance—he reserves the idea of ‘specialness’ and leaves his demythologisation of artists ultimately incomplete, a gesture which, as I shall show, will become familiar in his discussions of creative writing.

(2) The superego

The superego is genealogically quite separate from the reality principle. It originated as the “ego ideal”—one’s own aspirational self-image—in ‘On Narcissism’ (1914), where Freud theorises that a second psychological “agency” must be present to hold the ego to the standards of the ego ideal, generating a “sense of guilt” whenever these are not met, and to do the work of unconscious censorship (XIV: 93-95). At this point Freud does not conceive of the ego ideal as universal, noting that where it does exist in a psyche it causes “pathogenic repression” (XIV: 93) and leads to illnesses such as obsessional neurosis. By the time he outlined his second topographical model in ‘The Ego and the Id’ (1923), however, Freud had merged the ego ideal and its regulating agency into the superego, a now universal mechanism set up as an internalised residual reaction following the repression of the Oedipus complex (XIX: 34).

The superego has no apparent relation to the reality principle (which is located in the ego (XIX: 28 n.2)), and is—as Freud says in the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933)—based on the superegos of one’s parents, allowing it to act as the “vehicle of tradition” down the generations (XXII: 67). If this suggests a stabilising force in the psyche, however, Freud is keen to emphasise otherwise, asserting in ‘The Ego and the Id’ that the sense of guilt which is the residue of instinctual repression demanded by the superego has, even in ‘normal’ psyches, a “compulsive character which manifests itself in the form of a categorical imperative” (XIX: 35). This character aligns the

superego with the fact that discipline, as I noted in my introduction, is liable to slide into indiscipline via a kind of psychical Moebian loop. In those with neurotic disorders, the sense of guilt is “over-strongly conscious” and the superego operates with “particular severity” against the ego (XIX: 51); in the worst cases, the ego may suffer “decomposition” and death thanks to the superego’s moralising attacks (XIX: 56-57). Put another way, the very force supposed to bring discipline and order to the psyche manifests as anything but disciplined itself: in contrast to Derrida’s succinct description of the reality principle as “the disciplined one who disciplines”, the superego is presumably the *undisciplined* one who disciplines nevertheless.¹⁴⁶ As Robert Smith notes, whether the superego is “an aggressive or socialising power”, better suited for safeguarding the ego in its relations with others or for destroying from within the psyche it regulates, is an ambiguity Freud does not resolve.¹⁴⁷

Freud’s late essay ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’ (1930) brings together his account of the superego with his theories of art-making. Here he reiterates the compulsiveness of the superego, describing it as a dysfunctional positive feedback loop whereby “[e]very renunciation of instinct now becomes a dynamic source of conscience and every fresh renunciation increases the latter’s severity and intolerance” (XXI: 128); psychoanalysis, therefore, must sometimes aim to “oppose the super-ego, and [...] to lower its demands” (XXI: 143). Nonetheless, Freud makes clear that it is in the compulsive and dysfunctional superego that the roots of civilisation lie, arguing that the renunciation of instinctual impulses is “the most important problem in the development of civilisation” (XXI: 134): understand our unstable, messy mechanisms of self-discipline, Freud seems to suggest, and one will understand society and culture. Freud was sceptical throughout his career of the value of this intense self-denial, expressing concern about this as early as 1908 in his paper “‘Civilised’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness’, and in ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’ he argues that the developments of human culture equate to an alienation of humans from their deepest instinctual satisfactions. Art-making, he asserts, provides only a weak form of satisfaction which “does not convulse our physical being with pleasure” (XXI:

¹⁴⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 282. In a long analysis of Freud’s ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ Derrida compares the reality principle to a kind of employee or representative of the pleasure principle, who must nevertheless attempt to “educate” its master out of its own desires.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, *Death-Drive*, 72–73.

80); pleasure in others' artworks, likewise, is a source of "mild narcosis [...] not strong enough to make us forget real misery" (XXI: 81). Even here, however, he mentions that art-making is only available to those with "special dispositions and gifts" (XXI: 80): the "dispositions" presumably being the susceptibility towards neurosis he mentioned in 'Two Principles', and the "gifts" being the mysterious artistic talent, again unexplained, which enable the moulding of fantasies into artworks. The "special" qualities of artists are incongruously retained despite art's overall inadequacy to mitigate society's discontents, hinting at Freud's reluctance fully to jettison the value of art, despite its psychical costs.

This ambivalence is particularly startlingly visible in a long footnote Freud appends to his own comments on art. Here, contrary to his worries about the cost of instinctual sublimation, he actually extols the benefits of *work*: for grounding the individual in reality, for displacing libidinal aggression, and for preserving and justifying a social existence. "Professional activity," he writes,

is a source of special satisfaction if it is a freely chosen one—if, that is to say, by means of sublimation, it makes possible the use of existing inclinations, of persisting or constitutionally reinforced instinctual impulses. [...] And yet, as a path to happiness, work is not highly prized by men [...] this natural human aversion to work raises most difficult social problems.

[XXI: 80n.]

Suddenly the discipline of work, the sublimation it requires, becomes the solution to the very discontent this sublimation has produced, even if motivated by the same dangerous superego whose demands psychoanalysis must sometimes oppose. That Freud put this view into a footnote seems to enact a literal undermining of his own 'official' argument, again suggesting his unwillingness to reject all forms of human culture in favour of a more complete instinctual fulfilment.

Freud's ambivalence about the relationship between discipline and culture reaches full expression at the end of 'Civilisation and Its Discontents', where he declares that "it is very far from my intention to express an opinion on the value of human civilisation" (XXI: 144)—an odd assertion, since that is more or less what the whole 80-page essay has been doing. He extends this performance of abdication, moreover, with a series of elaborate syntactical displacements which conspicuously avoid committing him to either side of the argument:

It is very far from my intention to express an opinion upon the value of human civilisation. *I have endeavoured to guard myself against the enthusiastic prejudice which holds that our civilisation is the most precious thing that we possess or could acquire and that its path will necessarily lead to heights of unimagined perfection. I can at least listen without indignation to the critic who is of the opinion that when one surveys the aims of cultural endeavour and the means it employs, one is bound to come to the conclusion that the whole effort is not worth the trouble, and that the outcome of it can only be a state of affairs which the individual will be unable to tolerate. My impartiality is made all the easier to me by my knowing very little about all these things.*

[XXI: 144-45, my emphases]

These strategic denials enable Freud to keep in play several incompatible models of the relationship between discipline and culture: a view of artists and art as symptomatic of both individual and societal neurosis; a romantic idea of the “special gifts” of the artist; culture as too instinctually costly for human wellbeing; and work as a source of “special satisfaction”. Declaring himself not only unable but *unqualified* (by “knowing very little about all these things”) to answer the very question he has posed in ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’, Freud effectively evades the mutual impaction of these ideas which arises from his attachments to both culture *and* science, Romantic *and* Enlightenment modes of thought, mystery *and* knowledge. His deferrals and abdications from the responsibility of expressing an opinion clearly indicate his underlying investment—performed as a complicated humility—in keeping certain questions unresolved. As I shall show, these strategies will also prove characteristic of his work on creativity.

“How the writer accomplishes this is his innermost secret”: Demystifying and remystifying the creative writer

We have, then, a sense of Freud as intensely interested in explaining how the successes or failures of discipline are transfigured into works of art, but also keen to retain a certain ‘specialness’ as the preserve of the artist, despite his otherwise unromantic, even pejorative, accounts of how artists are motivated. I turn now to a closer examination of how these dynamics are repeated and amplified in Freud’s accounts of, specifically, creative writing—particularly his essay ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, delivered to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1907 and published in 1908. This paper precedes his accounts of art in ‘Two Principles’ and ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’, but was written in a period, as Birgit Lang notes, during which the Society was particularly occupied with how psychoanalysis might gain insight into creative artists and artworks. In 1906 the Society enjoyed an influx of cultural critics and analysts with artistic interests, such as Max Graf and Otto Rank; this group worked hard to oppose an earlier trend of pathographic diagnoses of creative artists as “degenerate” (in the medical sense), and produced many psychoanalytic studies of artists and artworks which were highly adulatory of their subjects while still claiming to be ‘scientific’. Freud, Lang argues, saw an opportunity to popularise psychoanalysis by writing in a more “open-form” way where theory, biography and art criticism interact, in order to appeal to public interest in the psychology of artists; Lang particularly cites Freud’s study of Wilhelm Jensen’s story *Gradiva* (1907), his paper on Leonardo da Vinci (1910), and ‘The Uncanny’ (1919) as examples of this new type of case study.¹⁴⁸ The tensions between demystification and remystification, pathologisation and veneration, were therefore highly active questions while ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ was being written.

At the heart of these discussions, Lang suggests, was the question of whether writers and other artists are exceptional and special beings (perhaps with an innate, quasi-magical capacity for motivation), or ‘normal’ people who have deliberately

¹⁴⁸ Birgit Lang, “Fin-de-Siècle Investigations of the ‘Creative Genius’ in Psychiatry and Psychoanalysis”, in Birgit Lang, Joy Damousi, and Alison Lewis, *A History of the Case Study: Sexology, Psychoanalysis, Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 67–68.

cultivated their own (universal) creative powers through work and discipline. This question, as I showed in my first chapter, underlies many modern discussions of writerly discipline, whose professed demystifying intentions—visible in their insistence that writing can be understood in terms of technique and hard work—are regularly gainsaid by moments of remystification, including a kind of exceptionalism which suggests that ultimately discipline might be insufficient and a kind of transcendent ‘true’ creativity is needed. In her analysis of these trends in psychoanalytic thought, Lang employs a set of terms which she takes from Christian Zimmerman’s distinction of two possible narratives visible in biographical writing, and which echo my discussion of demystification and remystification: *anthropologisation*, “an attempt to underline similarities between exceptional and average human beings” (in Lang’s words), roughly corresponding to my term *demystification*; and *idealisation*, “an admiring elevation of biographical subjects that emphasises their status as exceptional individuals,” corresponding to *remystification*.¹⁴⁹ For Zimmerman, the tension between these two narratives is a characteristically modern one; the same tension, as I shall show, pervades not only Freud’s biographical work but also his theories of creative writing, as well as discourses of writerly discipline. As I have said, Freud is not particularly interested in the *practice* of creative writing: he rarely seems even to consider that writing might be hard work, to explore how writers manage fluctuations in energy and motivation, or even to acknowledge that he himself is a writer.¹⁵⁰ Strikingly, though, in ‘Creative

¹⁴⁹ Lang, 55.

¹⁵⁰ David Heinimann is inclined to pathologise Freud’s silence on his own status as a writer, arguing (via analysis of ‘Creative Writers ...’, the Leonardo paper, and Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*) that Freud is silently writing from the position of a “[r]edirected” or even failed creative writer, writing to exorcise not a rival poet but a whole civilisation. For Heinimann, Freud’s image of laying down arms before the problem of the creative writer in ‘Dostoevsky and Parricide’ indicates “the reaction-formation resentment of a writer who wanted to be an artist but whose interrogation of the role prevented him becoming one”. He notes parallels between Leonardo’s ‘failures’ and Freud’s own professed failures in developing the capacities of psychoanalysis, including a moment where Freud declares psychoanalysis incapable of explaining why an individual like Leonardo might have a particularly high capacity for repression and sublimation. See David Heinimann, “The Fiction of Freud,” *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 1, no. 1 (1995): 45–58.

Birgit Lang also notes that many members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society had written creatively during their youth, and suggests that this explains the ambivalence which pervades their work on art: “The passion that the psychoanalysts brought to debates concerning genius and creativity was fuelled by a complex subcurrent of competitiveness with writers of literature and poetry in particular, and creative artists in general” (Lang, 69). While both Heinimann and Lang are right to point to the friction between Romantic and Enlightenment sensibilities in Freud’s work and that of his contemporaries, my own reading of these ambivalences is broader: as I am arguing in this project, it is characteristic of twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourses around creative writing, not only of

Writers and Day-Dreaming' and in multiple other places in his work, Freud evinces a slippage between anthropologisation and idealisation, a vagueness about the role of the unconscious in creative writing, and a reiteration of the limits of psychoanalysis which all suggest an aim entirely contrary to his lifelong demystification project: a determination to preserve the writer as 'special'.

The opening of 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' immediately addresses the anthropologisation/idealisation question. Freud, speaking from the position of a 'layman' (that is, a reader), declares his intention to show, at least by analogy, that creative writers are just like normal people:

We laymen have always been intensely curious to know [...] from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable. Our interest is only heightened the more by the fact that, if we ask him, the writer himself gives us no explanation, or none that is satisfactory; and it is not at all weakened by our knowledge that not even the clearest insight into the determinants of his choice of material and into the nature of the art of creating imaginative form will ever help to make creative writers of *us*.

If we could at least discover in ourselves or in people like ourselves an activity which was in some way akin to creative writing! An examination of it would then give us a hope of obtaining the beginnings of an explanation of the creative work of writers. And, indeed, there is some prospect of this being possible. After all, creative writers themselves like to lessen the distance between their kind and the common run of humanity; they so often assure us that every man is a poet at heart and that the last poet will not perish till the last man does.

[IX: 143]

Whether or not the last sentence of this passage is read as a lightly sarcastic jibe about the disingenuous or condescending habits of poets, Freud seems to inaugurate a kind of *fort-da* game, a repeated push-pull, with the figure of "that strange being, the creative writer".¹⁵¹ His curiosity, or rather the curiosity of "we laymen" that he affects

Freud's work, that attempts to demystify the creative process should be urgently active but also doomed to failure.

¹⁵¹ *Fort-da* comes from Freud's description in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) of his grandson's game with a reel of string, involving throwing the reel away and shouting "*fort*" (gone), and pulling it

to ventriloquise, takes him closer to the creative writer; he cherishes “a hope”, “some prospect”, of “lessen[ing] the distance” between writers and “the common run of humanity”, a clearly anthropologising (demystifying) aim. On the other hand, he seems to think little of writers’ own explanations of their practice, and has also nullified in advance—one may even say, has *prohibited*—any prospect of a psychoanalytic account of writing helping a ‘layman’ to become a writer if he is not one already, suggesting, in a much more idealising move, that writers are after all definitely and permanently separate from “the common run of humanity”.

Having declared (and immediately qualified) his anthropologising intentions, Freud moves into a fairly straightforward analysis of links between childhood play, fantasy, daydreams and night-dreams, and desire, with the clear intention of showing that these sets of psychodynamics are universal and become the material for the creative writer’s own work—the latter amounting to a kind of distorted wish-fulfilment (IX: 143-50). In this sense, Freud implies, analysing literature may not be very different from analysing dreams; he suggests that even a complex “psychological novel” will be eventually understood according to the wish-fulfilment model (IX: 150). On the other hand, he is keen to emphasise that the fantasies from which the material of creative writing is drawn are *conscious* daydreams, which arise from the relegation of childhood play into an exclusively virtual realm. Creative writing, by this account, does not happen “in the dark”, in Hilary Mantel’s phrase,¹⁵² but is a calculated process of adjusting universal daydreams to make them less repellent to others and to add a kind of aesthetic pleasure for the reader (IX: 153); since this process is fully conscious, it should, we might expect, be fully explicable.

Despite these demystifying, anthropologising, universalising arguments, however, the brief idealisation or mystification of the creative writer in its first paragraphs unexpectedly becomes the essay’s dominant note by its conclusion. Here Freud acknowledges that “although I have put the creative writer first in the title of my paper, I have told you far less about him than about phantasies” (IX: 152). This appears to presage a final anthropologising move in which Freud explains that creative writers are after all fully explicable in terms of the universal dynamics of fantasy and

back in with “*da*” (there). Freud uses this observation to exemplify an individual’s deliberate creation of unpleasure which must call into question the domination of the pleasure principle (XVIII: 14-15).

¹⁵² Hilary Mantel, “Hilary Mantel on How Writers Learn to Trust Themselves,” Literary Hub, October 27, 2020, <https://lithub.com/hilary-mantel-on-how-writers-learn-to-trust-themselves/>.

daydreams that he has set out. Instead, however, Freud takes a sharp step away from a full anthropologisation (or demystification) of the creative writer, and back towards idealisation, or remystification. How a writer alters his fantasies to make them pleasurable to readers, Freud insists, is “his innermost secret”: the “essential *ars poetica*” consists of techniques which we can only “guess”, such as ways of disguising the inevitably repellent original fantasy and creating a “purely formal” pleasure, or “forepleasure”, akin to that which accompanies the build-up to the punchline of a joke (all IX: 153). Having dangled these mystifying phrases in front of the reader, Freud somewhat abruptly ends the paper: “This brings us to the threshold of new, interesting and complicated enquiries; but also, at least for the moment, to the end of our discussion” (IX: 153).

Thus a paper which began by announcing its intention to anthropologise the creative writer by showing that every man is, indeed, “a poet at heart” ends by locating the “essential *ars poetica*” in the way universal fantasies are *altered*—these alterations by the writer being (and, on Freud’s watch, remaining) “his innermost secret”. This is less *fort-da*, the game of pushing away and pulling back a treasured object, and more like *da-fort*, a bringing-closer of the creative writer only to distance him more definitely from our understanding. Freud’s casual mention of the “forepleasure” which precedes the liberation of mental tension during a joke only seems to highlight how much of the tension of mystery actually remains, how little insight has actually been delivered. His admission that he has said little about the creative writer is telling: it is echoed by Philip Pullman’s 2017 remark at the end of his description of his daily routine: “I see I haven’t said anything yet about the central activity itself”—that is, writing.¹⁵³ That both authors draw attention to their own omission suggests they are content, even pleased, to have failed to demystify creative writing. Perhaps most

¹⁵³ Philip Pullman, “Philip Pullman: ‘I Use Coloured Pencils to Show Which Key I’m Writing in—D Minor, at the Moment,’” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/dec/23/philip-pullman-writing-day-coloured-pencils>.

Many commentators on ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ are, whether consciously or not, unwilling to draw attention to its slipperiness. It is notable, for instance, that very few of the essays in a 1995 edited volume on the essay really attempt a psychoanalytic account of creative writing. Even José A. Infante’s contribution ‘Some Reflections on Phantasy and Creativity’, despite its promising title, only turns to the question of artistic creation on its final page, having spent most of its length discussing phantasy—echoing, without acknowledgement, the lopsided structure of Freud’s own essay. See José A. Infante, “Some Reflections on Phantasy and Creativity,” in *On Freud’s “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming,”* ed. Ethel Spector Person, Peter Fonagy, and Sérvulo Augusto Figueira (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 53–64.

revealingly of all, Freud remarked to the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1909 that “[P]oets are too precious to us to simply [serve to] illustrate that every human being has such typical impulses”¹⁵⁴—suggesting that his hope for a universalised, demystified understanding of creativity, as declared at the beginning of ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, was far from unqualified, and perhaps even disingenuous.

The strength of Freud’s investment in preserving the mystery of writing is further suggested by an inconsistency between ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’ and his earlier paper on Jensen’s *Gradiva*. In ‘Creative Writers’, as I have noted, Freud is clear in his distinction between the unconscious censorship of semi-conscious night-dreams, as established in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) (V: 526), and the conscious censorship of conscious daydreams, the latter eventually becoming the raw material of creative writing via processes of deliberate alteration (IX: 153). Not only is this model at odds with popular ideas of the Freudian unconscious as the source of creative content, it entirely contradicts what Freud has previously said in the *Gradiva* paper. Towards the end of that essay, Freud astonishingly suggests not only that creative material is in fact drawn from the unconscious, but that an author is actually able to gain direct access to it:

The author [...] directs his attention to the unconscious in his own mind, he listens to its possible developments and lends them artistic expression instead of suppressing them by conscious criticism. Thus he experiences from himself what we [i.e. psychoanalysts] learn from others—the laws which the activities of this unconscious must obey.

[IX: 92]

¹⁵⁴ Quoted in Lang, "Fin-de-Siècle Investigations," 71.

There is also a curious inconsistency in Freud’s study of Leonardo da Vinci where, having outlined the three types of sublimation—(1) that causing neurotic illness; (2) that resulting in brooding coloured with pleasure and anxiety; and (3) the “rarest and most perfect” type where all sexual feeling is entirely dissolved into the research urge (XI: 79-80)—Freud immediately assigns Leonardo to the third category, based on the later part of Leonardo’s life when scientific research was his highest priority. This is strange, however, given Freud’s acknowledgement of the intense anxiety and inhibition in Leonardo’s artistic career which resulted in him leaving several artworks unfinished (XI: 66-68); Freud seems not to connect this with the “interminable” brooding characteristic of the second type of sublimation until much later in the essay, when describing the cost of this sublimation and the way it pulled Leonardo towards “the regressions in neurotics” (XI: 133). One wonders if Freud’s admiration of Leonardo inhibited him from connecting the artist’s inability to finish paintings with the way that “the intellectual feeling, so much desired, of having found a solution recedes more and more into the distance” (XI: 80); instead, by assigning Leonardo to the “rarest and most perfect” category of sublimation, Freud both recuperates him from pathologising accusations of neurosis, and preserves him as an exceptional artist.

The second sentence, contrasting the direct access of writers to their own unconscious with the merely secondary access enjoyed by psychoanalysts, suggests that for Freud this primary access is in fact a distinguishing feature of creative writers. Having meticulously established the unconscious as universally unavailable to direct access right from early works like *The Interpretation of Dreams* (see, for instance, V: 541), Freud now exempts the creative writer from this precept in order to explain the impressive psychological accuracy (that is, the fidelity to his own theories) of a story like *Gradiva*. The writer is put in the extraordinary position of someone able to analyse his own unconscious—unlike most, he can be his own psychoanalyst—and to turn off the “conscious criticism” which might “suppress” (repress or censor) his unconscious fantasies. As in Romantic theories of inspiration and creativity which (as I noted in my previous chapter) held that a writer gifted with true inspiration need not be subject to the same rules and limitations taught to others, for Freud the creative writer is not just innately gifted, he is free from normal psychological limitations: a kind of psychoanalytic glitch.

That Freud is willing to contradict such a key tenet of psychoanalysis in his discussions of creative writing is suggestive. The insistence in the *Gradiva* paper that the writer enjoys privileged access to his own unconscious is further evidence of Freud’s slippages between demystifying and remystifying moves, here appearing to give insight into the writer while awarding him a major exemption from universal psychological laws. Nor are these slippages entirely explained by the earliness of these essays in Freud’s career. As Robert Smith notes, Freud never updated the work done in ‘Creative Writers’ in the light of his later metapsychological work on the death drive, and his work on creative writing remained faltering, truncated, and theoretically unsatisfying.¹⁵⁵ Where he does mention the subject in his later work, moreover, Freud seems consistently intent on preserving the mystery of the creative writer against the potential demystifications of psychoanalysis. His Introductory Lecture 23, ‘The Paths to the Formation of Symptoms’ (delivered in the winter of 1916-17), for instance, contains a final section about art-making, where he reiterates the arguments of ‘Creative Writers’ and ‘Two Principles of Mental Functioning’ and states that “a true artist [...] possesses the *mysterious* power of shaping some particular material until it

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *Death-Drive*, 115.

has become a faithful image of his phantasy” (XVI: 376, my emphasis). Elsewhere these mystifying moments come in the form of abdications about the capacities of psychoanalysis *tout court*. In ‘An Autobiographical Study’ (1925), briefly discussing his contributions to art history, Freud once again insists that psychoanalysis “can do nothing towards elucidating the nature of the artistic gift, nor can it explain the means by which the artist works—artistic technique” (XX: 65). And in the oft-quoted first paragraph of ‘Dostoevsky and Parricide’ (1928), Freud explains that he will analyse Dostoevsky as neurotic, moralist, and sinner—but *not* as a writer, asserting: “Before the problem of the creative artist analysis must, alas, lay down its arms” (XXI: 177).¹⁵⁶ As in ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’, Freud dissolves his most pressing questions into a set of mystifying denials, repeatedly returning to the subject of creative writing to declare that psychoanalysis cannot possibly account for it.

I conclude from these obfuscations and abdications that Freud was invested in ringfencing the figure of the artist from the demystifying project of psychoanalysis even to the point of risking the consistency of the discipline he had himself founded. He eventually argued in ‘Analysis Terminable and Interminable’ (1937) that total analysis was impossible because it ultimately hits the “bedrock” of biology (XXIII: 252), encountering resistances (such as penis envy) which may never be fully dissipated. But it is clear that he encountered another, less scrupulously acknowledged block: his attachment to Romantic humanism (visible in his frequent quotations from Goethe and Schiller), which made it vital that the creative writer remain highly prestigious and yet inaccessible, that investigations into creativity would, like psychoanalytic treatment, always remain asymptotically interminable. While versions of Freud’s theories employed in discussions of writerly discipline may simplify or misrepresent his work, this is in fact no more than Freud does himself; moreover, the ambivalence visible in both Freud and modern discourses, the gestures of demystification and remystification, suggest a discursive continuum, a structural bind repeated over many decades by a discourse which both does and does not want to know how creative writing works. As in discourses of writerly discipline, the slippage from

¹⁵⁶ Derrida notes a series of similar ‘dismissals’ in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, where Freud is compelled “to reject, to set aside, to make disappear, to distance (*fort*), to defer everything that appears to put the PP [pleasure principle] into question.” These dismissals, similar to what I am terming ‘abdications’, contribute to what Derrida describes as the “athetic” nature of Freud’s text. See Derrida, *The Post Card*, 295–96.

demystification to remystification in Freud is so conspicuous that it seems almost essential to the discourse: the proof of success of an account of creative writing is not that it explains how writing works, but that it fails to explain anything.

“Something that is not yet absolutely forbidden ...”:

Freudian displacements and the prohibition of writing

I have shown how Freud seems to relish the *da-fort* game he plays with the mystery of creative writing, the way he offers selected insights before abruptly declaring the investigation has reached its limit or is entirely doomed to fail. Like his grandson Ernst, throwing away the reel of string in order to pull it back in again (XVIII: 14-15), Freud seems to relish the push-pull, or pull-push, he creates in ‘Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming’, drawing creative writers closer to laypeople in an anthropologising gesture, before re-distancing them again in an idealising one. This dynamic is also characteristic, as I showed in my first chapter, of modern discourses of writerly discipline, which gravitate self-contradictorily between demystifying assertions that writing is mostly a matter of discipline and technique, and remystifying suggestions that the ‘truth’ of writing might be in the very part of it which cannot be reduced in this way.

I now move into a more speculative reading of other resonances between Freud’s work and discourses of writerly discipline. It seems apt to describe the push-pull between demystification (or anthropologisation) and remystification (or idealisation) not only as a dynamic but as a *narrative*: this term captures how, even within single articles or interviews, the ‘tension’ of the mystery of writing is partly dispelled, then regenerated, throughout these discourses. Indeed, it is helpful to figure this pattern in Peter Brooks’s psychoanalytic-narratological terms, where the generation of narrative complication or suspense is analogous to the raising of tension within a psyche, and the dispersal of mystery corresponds to a pleasurable discharge of tension in response to the death drive:

The development of a narrative shows that the tension is maintained as an ever more complicated postponement or *détour* leading back to the goal of quiescence [...] the narrative must tend toward its end, seek illumination in its own death [...] The desire of the text (the desire of reading) is hence desire for the end, but desire for the end

reached only through the at least minimally complicated detour, the intentional deviance, in tension, which is the plot of narrative.¹⁵⁷

The detours and delays of plot, for Brooks, are analogous to the small bindings of energy enabled by repetition, all aiming at a final and complete discharge of energy in which the organism can die in its proper manner. However, as Brooks points out, any fictional ending is illusory (just as any analysis is potentially interminable), since new beginnings (or resistances) can always be generated at the end of any story.¹⁵⁸ The similarly promising, then deferring and abdicating, ways in which Freud treats his accounts of creative writing suggest a narrative perpetually in progress, whose ending—like Shahrazad’s death in the *Thousand and One Nights*—must be continually deferred by unresolved suspense.¹⁵⁹

What Brooks’s narratology does not answer so well is the question of *why* the ‘narrative’ of creative writing must be kept in this perpetual, ambivalent movement between demystification and remystification, both in Freud’s work and in modern discourses. Perhaps ironically, Freud himself offers a way of thinking through this question in another early paper, ‘Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices’ (1907), which facilitates a reading of the modern fascination with explaining, but also not quite explaining, the mysterious relationship between creative writing and discipline. In this paper Freud examines the “ceremonial” activities (IX: 117) of obsessional neurosis—patterns of behaviour we might now term *obsessive compulsive disorder*—consisting of the elaboration, adjustment, and prolongation of apparently trivial actions in order to dispel psychic tension. Highlighting similarities between obsessional neurosis and the ceremonials of religious practices, Freud argues that both these sets of actions, though apparently opaque or obscure in their surface meanings, become meaningful when interpreted via a chain of symbolic displacements from an original instinctual impulse (usually sexual in obsessional neurosis, not necessarily in religion) (IX: 119–20). This original impulse has been repressed, but only partly, and the psychic tension transferred onto an unrelated but highly symbolic action; this tension, manifesting as an unconscious sense of guilt, is thus now temporarily dispersible through the

¹⁵⁷ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 103–4.

¹⁵⁸ Brooks, 109–10.

¹⁵⁹ Brooks, 60–61.

ceremonial. Freud asserts that “a ceremonial represents the sum of the conditions subject to which something that is not yet absolutely forbidden is permitted” (IX: 124), suggesting that a ceremonial is produced according to a kind of triple temporality, where a past repressed impulse is temporarily to be satisfied in the present in anticipation of a future total prohibition by the increasingly neurotic psyche. Freud gives the example of sexual congress, now only permitted under the licensing regime of marriage (IX: 124-25)—an interesting example, since he is hinting that sexual activity within marriage could be read as a *neurotic* version of whatever ‘original’ sexual instinct has been prohibited and repressed, and thus that (as he indeed argues in ‘Civilisation and Its Discontents’) civilised society is itself afflicted with a collective neurosis.

Although an obvious connection between ‘Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices’ and the question of writerly discipline might be a potential reading of writers’ routines as a form of obsessive ceremonial, that is not my intention here: it is the *discourse* of writerly discipline, rather than its material forms, in which I remain interested. Instead, I wish to suggest that the modern obsession—and I do think it is an obsession—with writerly discipline functions, collectively, in a surprisingly similar way to Freud’s account of obsessive ceremonials: that any discussion of writers’ routines or editing techniques serves to elaborate and prolong a focus on seemingly trivial matters in order to displace and dispel, if only temporarily, some of the suspenseful mystery about how to produce ‘good’ writing. This displacement gives these questions of writerly discipline something (as Freud says) of the “utmost importance and urgency” (IX: 126) which they might not otherwise have, since they are coloured with whatever it is they have been displaced from, whatever instinctual impulse might have been prohibited and repressed. Thus questions about writerly discipline and creative writing technique in general are discussed again and again, the provisional answers provided by any one writer constituting not genuine progress towards an ‘answer’, but only a temporary relief from a persistent, forbidden urge.

Psychical displacement, as Laplanche and Pontalis’s dictionary of psychoanalysis notes, “has a clearly defensive function in the various formations in which the analyst encounters it”,¹⁶⁰ suggesting a reading of Freud’s own moments of displacement—the locating of the “secret” of writing outside of the psychoanalytic

¹⁶⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 123.

realm in the formal *ars poetica*, the repeated declarations that psychoanalysis cannot after all answer questions about writers' psychology—as unconsciously generated defence formations. But against what? What repressed impulse might inform both his and other writers' discourses on creative writing, and motivate the constant deferral of answers? And if these ceremonial-type activities represent “the sum of the conditions subject to which something that is not *yet* absolutely forbidden is permitted” (my emphasis), what apprehension of future prohibitions might this reading of these discourses make legible?

Two possible accounts—both equally speculative—might be offered, both of which take their cue from Freud's suggestion that neuroses can be collective, affecting whole cultural formations. The first reading is that the instinctual impulse of those fascinated with writerly discipline is towards knowledge, towards the final demystification of writing which would once and for all reveal its mystery. This ultimate revelation is both desirable and threatening, since, while it would enable a final discharge of suspenseful tension, it would simultaneously surely render writing obsolete: just as the final dispersal of psychological resistances and repression through psychoanalysis marks the end of the analysis, writing's mystery would be coterminous with writing itself. The ‘plot’ of the attempt to explain writing, then, is one that must never be completed, must instead involve endless delays and detours, purporting to search for this mystery's ‘proper’ death while never intending to finally reach it (Shahrazad's urgent quest to save her own life through repeated narrative suspense may be indeed an apt analogy). Remaining in thrall to the knowledge-impulse, Freud and subsequent commentators cope with its pressure using the *da-fort* game visible throughout these discourses, the only version of demystification still permitted since it is immediately followed by remystification. This cultural system must remain in a state of constant tension, sometimes diminished but always re-increased, so that demystifying writing remains an urgent mission with the promise of fulfilment in the near future—*at last we are about to uncover the true nature of writing!*—but one whose success can only ever be temporary and incomplete.

A second version of these dynamics might place creativity (universal or exclusive, conscious or unconscious) in the role of the forbidden instinctual impulse, and identify the soon-to-be-prohibited activity as writing itself. I noted in my first chapter how discussions of writers' routines and ‘hygienic’ stylistics create an ethos where labour and efficiency become literary values in themselves, often apparently

taking the place of aesthetic pleasure (in writer or reader). Might, then, discussions of writerly discipline represent a technified, quantified version of writing deployed by these discourses as a form of creativity which is just about still acceptable, to defend against a feared or imagined, but total, future prohibition of writing—not by a neurotic psyche, but by larger socioeconomic forces? If capitalism has ‘given notice’ to the creative arts, forcing them into a state of ideological and economic precarity, might a collective neurosis have developed to displace creativity into questions of labour and productivity as an unconscious but perfectly logical defence against this threat? If so, how should we read the various ‘exceptions’ I identified, where the routine must always be breakable, the rules must always be ignorable, writing’s mystery must always be preserved and the writer’s prerogative to follow her own instincts must be protected? Perhaps as a second, parallel defence formation against the mundanity of discourses of writerly discipline which might render writing entirely ‘accounted for’, and which therefore must remain in a charged, unresolved ambivalence. By flickering perpetually between Romantic (mystifying) and Enlightenment (demystifying) tactics, discussions of creative writing avoid fully confronting either of the ‘bedrock’ limits of these ideologies: that writing is entirely a matter of individual spiritual expression, with no responsibility to capitalist logic, to which discipline should be irrelevant; or that writing is entirely banal and explicable, a matter of labour and perseverance, of hours spent producing and perfecting the work. One might speculate that, since either of these conclusions would threaten a capitalism which proffers ‘the arts’ as consolation for the alienating demands it makes on its subjects, it is imperative—for both writers and capitalist power-structures—that neither conclusion is ever entirely reached.

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Just as Freud remains ambivalent about the capacity of psychoanalysis to fully explain creative writers, Freud’s status in my investigations of writerly discipline is not fully resolvable. On one hand, as I have shown, Freud is a full participant in the *da-fort* game between demystification and remystification of creative writing which is still present in modern discourses. Further analysis of these discourses requires a form of critique which, as I have begun to do, sees mystification as a deliberate, possibly political strategy, rather than as a marker of temporary, provisional defeat (as Freud

sometimes claims it is). Michel Foucault, whose work I will bring into dialogue with writerly discipline in my next chapter, is one theorist who has proposed this kind of critique, especially in his work on the *scientia sexualis*—a set of discourses including Freudian psychoanalysis which, since the eighteenth century, has claimed to ‘explain’ sexuality while simultaneously mystifying it. Since Foucault has also famously theorised forms of social discipline, along with their underlying doctrines, my next chapter will explore several possibilities for using his work to critique discourses of writerly discipline.

On the other hand, Freud’s work is broad enough in scope that he offers ways to read the same contradictory dynamics in which he himself is a participant; these readings, as I have suggested, already point towards both individual psychologies and the collective political dynamics which might motivate and structure them. As Antony Easthope details, it has sometimes been usual to see psychoanalysis and its theory of the unconscious as entirely incommensurate with Marxist historical materialist thought (including that of Foucault), and to try to “expel the idea of the unconscious altogether on the grounds that it is inherently universalising and ahistorical”.¹⁶¹ However, as Easthope notes, not only are major theorists of capitalism such as Max Weber keen to emphasise that capitalist dynamics such as the ‘Protestant ethic’ are internalised by subjects, suggesting the relevance of a psychologising account, but even Foucault was in fact clearly influenced by psychoanalytic models in his conception of power as characterised by deflection and deferral.¹⁶² Easthope suggests an alternative view, one which imagines Freudianism and Marxism not as totally compatible and available to “a single totalising conception”, but as “always empirically related”; he quotes Stephen Heath’s metaphor of the psychoanalytic and materialist subjects as “like the recto and verso of a piece of paper,” adding, “you cannot cut the front of the paper without cutting the back”.¹⁶³

This relational model is perhaps most appropriate for my project of writerly discipline, since I have already reached a point where, as I speculated, psychoanalytic explanations of the dynamics of writerly discipline as both an individual psychological defence formation and a collective cultural one might require a wider political

¹⁶¹ Antony Easthope, “History and Psychoanalysis,” *Textual Practice* 9, no. 2 (1995): 350.

¹⁶² Easthope, 349, 351.

¹⁶³ Easthope, 355.

explanation. My Freudian reading of discourses of writerly discipline can therefore remain in the background of my next chapter on Foucault, providing points of interaction and correspondence—points at which, to extend Heath’s metaphor, a mark made on one side of the paper can be seen from the other side—rather than being fully superseded by a Foucauldian account.

“An immense apparatus for producing truth”

Foucauldian Discipline and the Construction of Creativity

In my previous chapter I traced Freud’s theorisation of creative writing to show that his investment in preserving its mystery forms a discursive continuum with discourses of writerly discipline, despite the demystifying claims of both sets of texts. In this sense Freud is less useful than might have been expected, being part of the discursive patterns I have been critiquing; but it is also possible, as I suggested, to read the ambivalence between demystification and remystification in Freudian terms, as a defence formation against either the obsolescence or the cultural prohibition of writing, a strategy necessitated by writing’s fraught status in late capitalist culture. In this chapter I will continue to explore some of these tensions, but now in the light of the work of Michel Foucault, whose analysis of the interrelations between power and discourse enables a higher-level account of some of the dynamics I have identified in discourses of writerly discipline, and a clearer identification of the doctrines that underlie them.

Unlike Freud, Foucault has theorised *discipline* as a term in itself, and in several of the various senses the word carries. Most famously, in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) he examined the way enclosed institutions operate through corporeal restrictions, architectural structures, and discursive formations. In this text, and in all his subsequent work, Foucault’s interest in discipline is inextricable from his interest in discourse and its production, since, as he argued in his 1970 lecture ‘The Order of Discourse,’ discourse “is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle[:] discourse is the

power to be seized”.¹⁶⁴ This centrality of discourse to power, and thus its role in various forms of social discipline, is particularly developed in *The Will to Knowledge* (1976), the first volume of Foucault’s sprawling project *The History of Sexuality*. Here he asserts the productive function of discourse, arguing that the modern concept of sexuality was entirely produced—rather than ‘discovered’—from the eighteenth century onwards by a set of discourses he calls the *scientia sexualis*, incorporating Western medicine, religion, sexology, psychoanalysis, population theory, and eugenics. Volumes 2 and 3, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* (both 1984), though less explicitly concerned with discourse and its effects, address the question of how sex was problematised as a moral issue in Ancient Greece and Rome, showing that a sexual ethics was developed which required the intensification of one’s ethical relationship to oneself.

These approaches are all useful for my investigation of writerly discipline. In my previous chapter I undertook a detailed critique of Freud to demonstrate similar paradoxes and inconsistencies in his work to those evident in discourses of writerly discipline. My approach to Foucault’s work will be less a critique and more an extension, exploring analogies between his models of discursive power and discourses of writerly discipline. I will begin with a consideration of how Foucault’s account of institutional discipline in *Discipline and Punish* could be relevant for understanding aspects of writerly discipline. Although, to be sure, writers generally do not work in enclosed institutions under literal surveillance, certain features of Foucault’s analysis enable both an insight into writers’ performance of discipline as a response to perceived surveillance, and a ‘docile texts’ reading of disciplined stylistics analogous to Foucault’s famous ‘docile bodies’.

I will then turn to a comparison between the way creativity is construed in discourses of writerly discipline, and Foucault’s account of sexuality as a discursive formation in *The Will to Knowledge*. In particular, I will suggest that the concept of creativity may in fact be *produced* by discourses of writerly discipline in the same way that sexuality, in Foucault’s reading, is produced by the *scientia sexualis*; the retention of mystery at the heart of these discourses, as Foucault suggests, disguises its factitiousness and helps them retain a sense of urgency and authority. Reading the

¹⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young, trans. Ian McLeod (Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 52–53.

discourses this way thus engenders an account of discipline and its discourses as structurally essential to creativity, as a strategic knowledge-formation which constructs the very thing it claims to be managing, rather than as a secondary defence formation against a primary, repressed instinctual impulse.

Finally, I will use Foucault's tools for ethical analysis in *The Use of Pleasure* to explore how the moralisation of writerly discipline is structured around a set of presumed 'truths' or doctrine of creativity as an inherently unreliable, 'libidinised' force which needs careful management. As I shall suggest, this complex of truths and the discourses which reinscribe them might in fact have some of the characteristics of an academic discipline as Foucault defines it, suggesting in turn that, in order to construct a less restrictive ethics of creative writing than those exhorted by many advocates of writerly discipline, it may be additionally necessary to jettison the concept of innate personal creativity which underwrites writerly discipline.

“He becomes the principle of his own subjection”:

Discipline and Punish and the docile text

In *Discipline and Punish* (the English title is a necessarily imperfect translation of *Surveiller et punir*), Foucault proposes a meta-history of how Western techniques of control and punishment have evolved since the eighteenth century, from the ‘spectacular’ punishments of medieval monarchical justice to a ‘reformatory’ model of enclosed institutions such as prisons, schools, barracks and factories. These institutions, as he observes, differ sharply from older forms of enclosed communal living (such as monasteries) in their rejection of the *via negativa* for what might be called the *via positiva*.¹⁶⁵ Foucauldian institutions are complexly elaborated in their techniques for ordering and classifying their inhabitants, and mark the emergence of a new ‘micro-physics’ of power by which subjects in the institution are monitored, controlled, and made useful at every moment. In a section entitled ‘Discipline’, Foucault begins to classify the various techniques of using, transforming and improving the bodies under institutional control. He speaks of both “disciplines” (*les disciplines*), the specific techniques “which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility”,¹⁶⁶ and “discipline” (*la discipline*) in the singular, by which he seems to mean the overall political structure including not only the techniques of discipline but also the underlying goals and principles according to which these techniques are formulated.

Some key features of Foucault’s account of institutional discipline are particularly striking and relevant for my project:

TOTALITY. These institutions exercise “an uninterrupted, constant coercion”, and “constantly reached out to ever broader domains, as if [the disciplines] intended to cover the entire social body”.¹⁶⁷ The principle of constant surveillance, which

¹⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 154.

¹⁶⁶ Foucault, 137.

¹⁶⁷ Foucault, 137, 139.

Foucault terms *panopticism*, “enables the disciplinary power to be both absolutely indiscreet, since it is everywhere and always alert [...] it leaves no zone of shade”.¹⁶⁸

DOCILITY. “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved”;¹⁶⁹ docility thus combines the principle of obedience with that of utility. The disciplinary techniques of these institutions aim at increasing the efficiency and productivity of individuals by subjecting them to intense training and regulation.

DETAIL. The precision and intricacy of institutional systems—distributed by space, by time, by activity—lead Foucault to describe this mode of power as a “new micro-physics” in which everything is significant.¹⁷⁰ He cites a 1783 pedagogical text in which, in his words, “[t]he mystique of the everyday is joined here with the discipline of the minute”; everything in this kind of institutional setting is supervised, shaped, and turned to account. “Discipline,” Foucault says, “is a political anatomy of detail”.¹⁷¹

Discourses of writerly discipline, as I shall suggest, incorporate their own versions of totality, docility and detail. Yet any wholesale analogy between Foucauldian institutional discipline and the dynamics of writerly discipline is clearly inappropriate. There are no enclosed institutions of creative writing, nor any centralised authorities from which writerly discipline emanates as a compulsory system; the authorities which exhort it are diffuse and exert a cultural rather than legal-corporeal power. Moreover, the general philosophy of writerly discipline seems to work differently from the institutions Foucault describes. One cannot, for instance, draw a very convincing analogy between institutional timetables and writers’ routines, which aim principally at creating undifferentiated ‘spacious’ time for writers to work free of distraction. While Foucault’s general description of timetables’ functions—to “establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition”¹⁷²—seems accurate, writers’ routines preserve more of the monastic principle of “negativity”, trying to ensure that time is not wasted. Institutional timetables, conversely, propose a “positive economy”, the “principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time [and] extracting,

¹⁶⁸ Foucault, 177.

¹⁶⁹ Foucault, 136.

¹⁷⁰ Foucault, 139.

¹⁷¹ Foucault, 139–40.

¹⁷² Foucault, 149.

from time, ever more available moments”, which seems incongruous with discussions of the writer’s routine.¹⁷³

Taking account of these differences of materiality and ethos, I will instead work from Foucault’s suggestion that his account of institutional discipline could be extended to cover non-institutional settings: “‘Discipline’,” he writes, “may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a *type* of power, a *modality* for its [i.e. power’s] exercise”.¹⁷⁴ Likewise, the panopticon, a key architectural structure in the Foucauldian disciplinary institution, can also be a metaphor for extra-institutional surveillance: “It programmes [...] the basic functioning of a society penetrated through and through with disciplinary mechanisms”; here the panopticon figures a general move towards forms of social control which are both increasingly ‘light-touch’ and rapidly responsive, “a design of subtle coercion for a society to come”.¹⁷⁵ With this in mind, I will consider two slightly speculative analogies between Foucauldian institutional discipline and discourses of writerly discipline: firstly, that the contemporary writer is situated in a field of increasing visibility which requires her to prove her own discipline; and secondly, that the writer is urged to train her text into ‘docility’, seeking its efficiency as well as its obedience.

(1) The writer is situated in a field of increasing visibility

Panopticism, Foucault’s term for a constant and totalised form of surveillance, proposes a model of power where the subject of discipline is constantly visible to those in authority, and, knowing he might be being observed at any moment, behaves as if he is being observed at *every* moment: hence Foucault’s well-known formulation, “the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action”.¹⁷⁶ Aware of this permanence, the panoptic subject thus internalises this power-dynamic and performs it himself:

¹⁷³ Foucault, 154.

¹⁷⁴ Foucault, 215 (my emphases).

¹⁷⁵ Foucault, 209.

¹⁷⁶ Foucault, 201.

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.¹⁷⁷

This ‘self-inscription’ of power by the subject on himself is about as close to psychological analysis as Foucault tends to get, and indicates a possible point of mutual correspondence between the Freudian superego, constructed as part of an individual’s normal psychical development, and the internalisation of material forms of social surveillance. Panopticism is thus a helpful way of positioning the subjectivity of self-discipline in relation to wider cultural norms.

To be sure, writers tend to practise self-discipline in private, working (as descriptions of their routines make clear) in environments where their own solitude can be most strongly felt, such as early in the morning or in a secluded shed: a deliberate principle of *preventing* surveillance seems to operate. On the other hand, writers’ practices are also being made discursively and literally visible in new ways, from the existence and proliferation of discourses of writerly discipline, to the increasing expectation for writers to develop and sustain their public presence through journalism, social media, interviews, book launches and literary festivals. “When do you write?” is a typical question in many writers’ interviews, requiring the writer to confirm and account for—in some senses to *perform*—the disciplining of their own practice. *The Guardian*’s ‘My Writing Day’ column, meanwhile, was often populated by authors promoting new books, suggesting the commercial expediency of exchanging personal details of a writer’s practice for prominent column inches. Even when appearing simply to *describe* a writer’s disciplined practice, discourses of writerly discipline are surely *reinscribing* the necessity of that discipline, and fortifying the writer’s own visibility to an internalised authority—that is, herself—who functions as a kind of superego-supervisor, as well as wider cultural authorities. Further, although this field of surveillance is supposedly optional and known to be discontinuous in its action—writers are not in fear of an inspector knocking at the door to assess how strictly they are following their own routines—it may in fact be more or less continuous in its effects, since discourses of writerly discipline are pervasive

¹⁷⁷ Foucault, 202–3.

enough that even a novice writer is obliged to position herself in relation to them. Even if only some writers are literally or discursively visible at any one time, this discontinuous field of visibility may well, like the panopticon, “induce in the [writer] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”.¹⁷⁸

(2) The writer must train her text into docility

As I showed in Chapter 1, the ‘craft’ advice often given by commentators amounts to a kind of disciplining of ‘messiness’ in the writer’s own work; there is a fixation on efficiency and economy, in which maximum ‘meaning’ is to be extracted from the fewest possible words. This is not, it should be noted, an injunction towards productive literary ambiguity—rather to its moderation, since a text too dense and polysemous would not satisfy the requirements of writerly discipline—but perhaps to an assumed ideal ratio of wordcount to meaning which is thought to reside in a disciplined text. Slogans such as *Show don’t tell*, *Every word must earn its place*, and even *Kill your darlings* describe and formalise a stylistic economy in which this ratio becomes the basis of decisions about which words or sentences are to be left in or out. No amount of micromanagement, according to this principle, is too much: writerly discipline, like Foucauldian discipline, is an anatomy of detail, in which even single adverbs must be identified and excised. The writer is thus urged to become the all-seeing supervisor of what Foucault might call a ‘docile text’; she is encouraged to take up a relation of full mastery towards her own words, and extract the maximum obedience and utility from each one. In a ‘docile text’ stylistics, aesthetic pleasure and originality are subordinated to efficiency and precision.

Further than this, both sets of discourses—those on which Foucault draws for his account of institutional discipline, and those of writerly discipline—claim authority according to the principle of *naturalness*. Foucault explains that through the techniques of intensely detailed institutional training, “a new object was being formed [...] This new object is the natural body”. He illustrates this by quoting a military text from 1772 which critiques “excessively artificial movements” practised by soldiers and aims to

¹⁷⁸ Foucault, 201.

restore them to what “nature clearly prescribes”.¹⁷⁹ Foucault observes that the techniques of gesture and precision in which institutional subjects were instructed were thought to correlate with the body’s ‘natural’ anatomy, and “belonged to a whole series of researches, theoretical or practical, into the natural machinery of bodies”:

The body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and ‘cellular’, but also natural and ‘organic’.¹⁸⁰

While there is no corresponding widespread focus in discourses of writerly discipline on, for instance, the ergonomics of writing posture and how they affect the work produced, this emphasis on naturalness echoes, I think, the fixation on ‘plainness’, ‘cleanness’, and ‘clarity’ visible in some discourses of writerly discipline, particularly those who take the work of Hemingway and the style guide of Strunk as their models. These descriptors, particularly *plain*, suggest that this idealised stylistics is supposed to yield a kind of unornamented simplicity or naturalness in language which is its ‘proper’ form, like that described by Jeannette Ng (in the Twitter thread I quoted in Chapter 1) as a “relatively minimalistic (but not too minimalistic) text that will be a transparent window to the story and characters.”¹⁸¹ It is striking that Foucault describes the ‘natural body’ of institutional discipline as “the body of exercise, rather than of speculative physics; a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits”:¹⁸² while the passage is slightly obscure, it seems that Foucault is actually opposing the ‘natural body’ to that of “animal spirits”, and aligning it more with physical ‘fitness’ for the body’s tasks, as a wild animal’s body is ‘fitted’ to survival. Even this small point echoes the way that, in discourses of writerly discipline, exuberance and extravagance (“animal spirits”) are excluded from the disciplined text, rather than being celebrated as part of language’s ‘proper’ form: as Ng notes, this kind of exuberance is seen instead as ‘showing off’. Both the docile text and the docile body

¹⁷⁹ Foucault, 155.

¹⁸⁰ Foucault, 156.

¹⁸¹ Jeannette Ng, “Let’s Talk KILL YOUR DARLINGS and Other Such Self-Censoring Self-Limiting Rules about Writing,” Twitter, June 10, 2018, https://twitter.com/jeannette_ng/status/1005759385950441472.

¹⁸² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 155.

seem to be based on a factitiously ‘naturalised’, and surreptitiously moralised, focus on efficiency and mastery.

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Each of these analogies could, I think, prompt further investigation into how discourses of writerly discipline mimic some of the structures of institutional discipline; Foucault’s account is surprisingly flexible, despite its specificity of focus. Most useful of all in *Discipline and Punish*, perhaps, is the model of power Foucault articulates, which he continued to propose for the rest of his career:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.¹⁸³

Foucault intends to challenge a narrative of power which sees disciplinary structures as basically negative, as the oppressive concealment and constraint of a pre-existing essential, ‘raw’ force or ‘self’. His constructivist account collapses the temporality of this narrative in arguing for a productive model of power, something he most clearly articulates in his work on sexuality: that discourses which affect to describe a force or phenomenon in order to control it are in fact producing this phenomenon, which is thus always, already controlled. It is to this work, particularly *The Will to Knowledge*, that I will now turn, since it offers further similarities with discourses of writerly discipline, and has further implications for what forms of resistance to these power structures might be possible.

¹⁸³ Foucault, 194.

“A secret whose discovery is imperative”:

Foucauldian sexuality and the demystification of creativity

In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault offers an account of how sexuality became, from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, a prominent, highly moralised set of discourses with the authority of an academic discipline. He proposes this account in order to contradict what he calls the “repressive hypothesis”, the assumption that discourses around sex were silenced by strict social customs until ‘liberatory’ practices such as psychoanalysis began to encourage sex to speak its ‘truth’.¹⁸⁴ In fact, as Foucault shows, during this period there was a close and constant attention to sex on the part of numerous and various institutions and researchers which ensured that sex remained vividly present in cultural consciousness, and which in fact created—rather than ‘discovering’—the modern concept of sexuality.¹⁸⁵

In accounting for the formation of ideologies and institutions, and the specific power relations they generate around sex, Foucault articulates a model of power which is constituted by local, often contingent relations. These relations tend either to support one another, combining into more powerful forces, or to clash in contradictions and disjunctions. Although the ‘intentions’ of any power relation might be legible (and Foucault elsewhere speaks of power systems tending to form in response to an “urgent need”¹⁸⁶), this does not mean “that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject”; whole networks of power relations, in fact, are formed without anyone ‘inventing’ or even fully ‘intending’ them. Institutional authorities are, in this model, power’s “terminal forms”, rather than its point of origin.¹⁸⁷

This emphasis on decentralised, local power relations seems a more apt model than that of *Discipline and Punish* for analysing discourses of writerly discipline. Institutions and corporations which constitute the public existence of creative

¹⁸⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 10.

¹⁸⁵ Foucault, 17ff.

¹⁸⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh: A Conversation with Alain Grosrichard, Gerard Wajeman, Jacques-Alain Miller, Guy Le Gaufrey, Dominique Celas, Gerard Miller, Catherine Millot, Jocelyne Livi and Judith Miller,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York, NY: Vintage, 1980), 195, 204.

¹⁸⁷ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 92–95.

writing—publishing houses, literary agencies, booksellers, literary prizes, libraries, theatre companies, censorship legislation, academic departments, literary journalism, and so on—collectively form a diffuse and decentralised system of influence and power whose historical evolution has often been fairly contingent. Literary agencies, for instance, originally emerged as professional facilitators between authors and publishers; that they have become all but compulsory, and now themselves often rely on literary scouts, is more the result of their efficacy than of any particular authoritative decision (though this mechanism is frequently experienced by new writers as a deliberately closed system which automatically disadvantages them). Likewise, small details of pervasive literary ideologies, such as the injunction against adverbs I examined in Chapter 1, have been selected and reproduced by enough individuals in articles, books and creative writing classes that they have come to resemble a campaign or codified law which may even be taught in university Creative Writing departments: a “terminal form” of an originally unofficial, individual preference.

Several further features of Foucault’s account of sexuality in *The Will to Knowledge* make it strikingly appealing as an analogue for the way discourses of writerly discipline construct the relationship between creativity and discipline. Foucault argues that the modern “deployment of sexuality” in western Europe was the result not of a clear centralised movement of power, but of a “steady proliferation of discourses” on the part of various institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church, governments concerned with population control, medical professionals investigating ‘pathological’ sexual behaviour, and educational institutions trying to preserve the ‘innocence’ of children.¹⁸⁸ Not only the quantity but also the forms and methodologies of these discourses increased, with the advent of new ‘disciplines’ such as eugenics, sexology and psychoanalysis.¹⁸⁹ These various agencies of power combined—not in intention so much as in effect—to form a newly intense “incitement to discourse”,¹⁹⁰ an injunction to speak about sexuality in specifically orientated ways, with the eventual formation of the *scientia sexualis*.¹⁹¹ Contrary to the ‘repressive hypothesis’, then, sexuality was being widely discussed and controlled throughout the very period it was supposedly being suppressed.

¹⁸⁸ Foucault, 17–18.

¹⁸⁹ Foucault, 23ff.

¹⁹⁰ Foucault, 17.

¹⁹¹ Foucault, 51.

Foucault uses his “proliferation of discourses” argument as support for a more radical, constructivist theory: that sexuality is precisely congruent with the very discourses claiming to ‘discover’ it, and is therefore culturally constructed:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasure, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.¹⁹²

Without denying the material existence of sexual activity, Foucault suggests that any inquiry into sexuality is simply part of its production, rather than its discovery. At the same time, he identifies and critiques the simultaneous demystification and remystification present in these discourses, the way they both present sexuality as “a secret whose discovery is imperative, a thing abusively reduced to silence” and simultaneously preserve this same secret.¹⁹³ Foucault suggests this remystification—visible in, for instance, the way published reports of Jean-Martin Charcot’s experiments often omitted some of their more overtly sexual features—is strategic, enabling the discourses of the *scientia sexualis* to retain their urgency and power by continuing to exploit sexuality as “the secret”.¹⁹⁴ The *scientia sexualis* therefore becomes, in Foucault’s words, “an immense apparatus for producing truth, even if this truth [is] to be masked at the last moment.”¹⁹⁵

Clearly, this account offers far greater potential than *Discipline and Punish* for theorising the way discourses of writerly discipline operate. Firstly, there has actually been an observable ‘proliferation of discourses’ (comparable to that of the *scientia sexualis*) claiming to ‘discover’ how creativity is transformed into literature, and how it should be regulated.¹⁹⁶ Notably, this proliferation was contemporaneous with rapid

¹⁹² Foucault, 105–6.

¹⁹³ Foucault, 35.

¹⁹⁴ Foucault, 35.

¹⁹⁵ Foucault, 56.

¹⁹⁶ An Anglo-American history of this proliferation of discourses of creative writing might include such milestone texts (including some I cited in my history of creativity in Chapter 1) as: Romantic theories of creativity, such as Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*; Edgar Allen Poe’s essay ‘The

increases across Western nations in literacy rates, the demand for reading material, the production of literary publications (especially serials), and the number of individuals trying their hand at writing; one can speculate that this democratisation of literature, alongside the democratisation of creativity I traced in Chapter 1, generated anxiety about the quality of what was produced and writers' and readers' ability to evaluate it, prompting the production of instructional materials. Moreover, as I observed above, authors are expected to be increasingly publicly visible and to speak regularly about their practice, not unlike what Foucault terms the "incitement to discourse" around sexuality.¹⁹⁷

Further than this, in places discourses of sexuality and creativity suggest an overlap between the two that is more than analogical. Theories of creativity have often implied or worried that the creative impulse is saturated with sexualised potential which must be restrained, or at least detached from the final product (a view also implied by Freud in 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' when he discusses the necessity of altering one's fantasies¹⁹⁸). As Romana Byrne points out, the potential for sexualised pleasure has haunted discussions of aesthetic philosophy since the Enlightenment—though mostly focusing on the recipient, not the producer, of aesthetic objects—with many theorists such as Shaftesbury and Kant taking pains to distinguish "disinterested" aesthetic enjoyment from "unrestrained" or "licentious" pleasure.¹⁹⁹ There is even a metaphoric echo between the two sets of discourses: just as Foucault notes the "hysterisation" of the female body by the *scientia sexualis*, the way women's bodies were "thoroughly saturated with sexuality" by discourse,²⁰⁰ the idea of 'excessive' writing is explicitly and shockingly figured as the gory, female reproductive body in Bernard DeVoto's nauseated review (cited in Chapter 1) of

Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale' (1842); Henry James's essay 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) and his *New York Edition* prefaces (1907-9); Brander Matthews's *The Philosophy of the Short-Story* (1901); William Strunk's *The Elements of Style* (1918); the critical work of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound; 'textbook-anthologies' associated with the newly institutionalised study of creative writing, such as Wilbur Schramm's *The Story Workshop* (1938) and Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Fiction* (1943/1959); the *Paris Review* author interviews (1953 onwards); the advent of literary festivals with 'live' author interviews; and onward into both technical instructional creative writing manuals, and the more holistic 'self-help' genre of writing guides identified by Alexandria Peary (see Alexandria Peary, "Taking Self-Help Books Seriously: The Informal Aesthetic Education of Writers," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 48, no. 2 (2014): 86–104).

¹⁹⁷ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 17–18.

¹⁹⁸ Freud, *Standard Edition*, IX: 152–3.

¹⁹⁹ Romana Byrne, *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sodomasochism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 12.

²⁰⁰ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 104.

Thomas Wolfe's "placenta"-filled novel, with its "raw gobs" of emotion. Another, less obviously sexualised manifestation of this fear of unrestrained pleasure in writing is visible in the way that discourses of writerly discipline moralise against 'dirty', 'inefficient', or 'overindulgent' writing; *Kill your darlings*, moreover, refers to a kind of over-investment or over-cathexis in one's own work which is characterised as highly undesirable. It is possible that the apparent urgency driving the proliferation of discourses of writerly discipline—which I suggested in my previous chapter might result from a collective psychical displacement—may also be explained by their proximity to, their semi-congruence with, discourses of sexuality. Within injunctions against laziness and 'over-extravagant' writing is embedded a fear that without discipline the products of creativity will be threateningly licentious, with implications not only for the moral virtue of art, but for the sexual orderliness of society.

Of course, this analogy between sexuality and creativity has its limits: creative writing and its disciplines have not had the same quantity or range of institutional attention paid to them as sex; nor has writing been so closely related to capitalist considerations via the theme of population growth, what Foucault calls the "anatomopolitics of the human body";²⁰¹ nor are writing's associations with phenomena like deviancy, compulsiveness, criminality and insanity particularly conspicuous, in comparison to the intensely fraught positioning of sexuality among these threats. However, taking my cue from Foucault's *scientia sexualis*, I propose that discourses of writerly discipline, along with other discourses around creativity management, form a kind of '*scientia creationis*': a diffuse but nonetheless fairly coherent set of discourses which claim to address, and to some extent unravel, the mystery of creativity and art-making. Within these discourses, creativity is characterised as something exciting, useful and glamorous, but also unpredictable, mysterious and potentially sexualised, and therefore urgently in need of discipline. It is also, however, supposed to be in need of discovery and liberation: the use of Freudian narratives around creativity, especially in creative 'recovery' programmes like Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, suggests a kind of reigning 'repressive hypothesis' fuelling a recognisably modern determination that the source of personal creativity must not be 'blocked' by repressive societal norms. Like the *scientia sexualis*, then, a *scientia creationis* is indeed "an immense apparatus for producing truth, even if this truth [is]

²⁰¹ Foucault, 25–26, 139ff.

to be masked at the last moment”: the gestures of demystification and remystification I have repeatedly identified give the impression of a secret of creativity which is being both unmasked and conspicuously reinforced. To go further, this creativity might even be legible in Foucauldian terms as a *product* of the discourses describing it: far from being a secondary response to a ‘raw’ or ‘innate’ force, the role of discourses and practices of writerly discipline might thus be primary and constitutive. Creativity in this model would require discipline not only in a moral or pragmatic sense, but also in a structural, existential one, and the recurrent gestures of remystification would be a strategic means of disguising the constitutive role discourse plays in constructing creativity by repeatedly pointing to something which is necessarily always beyond discourse: creativity’s permanent, ineffable mystery.

Without proposing too totalising a model, then, and without wishing to deny the experiential reality of ‘altered states’ during creative practice, this view of discourses of writerly discipline as a *scientia creationis* would see some of their key features—its moralisation of discipline, its demystification and remystification of the writing process—as strategic, helping to mask the fact that creativity itself is a discursive construction: rather than creativity preceding discipline but nevertheless requiring it because of its own deficiencies, creativity is discursively constituted, faults and all, by discussions of discipline. It might therefore be impossible to conceive of a ‘raw’ creativity which is not already participating in (in Foucault’s words) the “great surface network” of creative writing discourses in which pleasures, practices, knowledges and controls are linked to one another and made politically and morally significant: creativity cannot be separated from discourses of writerly discipline and harnessed in some other way, because it is structurally constituted, already characterised, by those discourses.

“A domain of moral experience”:

A Foucauldian ethics of writerly discipline

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), as I have noted, Max Weber highlights that the increase of one’s capital is portrayed in Benjamin Franklin’s writings not just as “mere business astuteness”, but as an “ethos”, in which “[t]he infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty”.²⁰² I have similarly noted that discourses of writerly discipline recommend practices of discipline not (or not only) because they supposedly lead to more aesthetically pleasing work, but because these discourses see discipline as a *moral* obligation. Writerly discipline ensures that a writer remains in control of her own instinctual urges, and avoids the selfishness and self-indulgence of poor discipline which result in writing that is not only bad but also offensive. Discipline, in these discourses, goes beyond a pragmatic technique for improving one’s writing, beyond (in Weber’s terms) ‘mere creative astuteness’: it is indeed an *ethos*.

In order to further illuminate this ethos of writerly discipline, I take up the second volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, The Use of Pleasure*. Here Foucault’s analysis moves into the domain of ethics, and to a much earlier historical period, Ancient Greece and Rome, than that discussed in *The Will to Knowledge*. Despite this break, the unifying principle of the work remains the question of how discourse performs the *problematization* of sexuality—something Foucault defines as “the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought”.²⁰³ Whereas in *The Will to Knowledge* Foucault considers this by analysing how the *scientia sexualis* produced a ‘truth-effect’ with regard to sexuality, in *The Use of Pleasure* he asks how, in classical discourses, sexuality came “to be conceived as a domain of moral experience”.²⁰⁴ Central to this ethical domain is what Foucault calls the *rappor à soi*,

²⁰² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001), 17.

²⁰³ Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 257.

²⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality: 2*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 24.

the way a person relates ethically to himself, which “determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions”, and thus helps to define what counts as ethical behaviour.²⁰⁵

Foucault’s concept of the *rapport à soi* is particularly helpful for analysing the moralisation of writerly discipline, since the discourses I have analysed tend to imply that moral conflict and decision-making mostly take place intra-subjectively, within the writer rather than with any other person. In this sense, the *rapport à soi* provides a way of understanding how a structure like panopticism might be internalised so that it functions almost autonomously within an individual. Further, discourses of writerly discipline present these practices for the most part not as a system of specific codes but as a moral domain in which, as Foucault puts it, “the strong and dynamic element is to be sought in the forms and subjectivation and the practices of the self”.²⁰⁶ As he makes clear, an analysis of an ethical system must also go beyond the specifics of a moral code, since even when codified rules are specified, these do not automatically index a particular *rapport à soi*: there are multiple possible ways, for instance, to understand fidelity to one’s spouse as morally necessary or desirable.²⁰⁷ In writerly discipline, similarly, the moral weight often falls less on particular rules about how to exercise self-discipline, and more on the necessity of self-analysis in order to identify one’s personal conditions for producing good, morally regulated work, and using one’s own discipline to implement these. A slogan such as *Kill your darlings* epitomises this, being addressed precisely to the relationship of self to self which may be in need of discipline: the ‘darlings’ are the parts of a writer’s text which she loves ‘too much’, and can be identified and repudiated by her alone. Even when specific writing rules are asserted, such as Stephen King’s prohibition of adverbs, the variety of justifications for this rule—increasing trust, being economical, practising ‘tough love’—suggest multiple forms of the *rapport à soi* which might necessitate it.

Foucault gives a detailed schematic for breaking down the *rapport à soi*, which comprises four tools:

²⁰⁵ Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 351–52. In this interview Foucault gives an outline of his tools for ethical analysis which is more or less identical to that in *The Use of Pleasure*, which was published the following year. Thus I refer to the two texts interchangeably, according to which wording is most illuminating for my argument.

²⁰⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 30.

²⁰⁷ Foucault, 27.

ETHICAL SUBSTANCE (*substance éthique*). Foucault defines the ethical substance as “the main field of morality, the part of ourselves which is most relevant for morality”.²⁰⁸ He suggests that “feelings” are the primary ethical substance in modern life, whereas for Kantian ethics it was intention, for Christian ethics desire, and so on. It is the ethical substance which poses the initial moral problem, and *on* the ethical substance that the practices of ethical subjects are designed to work.

MODE OF SUBJECTION (*mode d’assujettissement*). Although Foucault’s *assujettissement* is translated by Robert Hurley as *subjection*, the act of subjecting something to one’s control, it is important to recognise the broader sense in which Foucault surely intends it, that of subjectivation or subject-formation, the production of a subjectivity in the network of power relations. Foucault describes the mode of subjection as “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognises himself as obliged to put it into practice”: it is thus a dialectic, interactive process which forms a subject’s imagination and understanding of how he is being interpellated or ‘hailed’ by the law, and the ideological reasoning for obeying it.²⁰⁹ Included within the mode of subjection are the principles on which the subject’s moral obligations are supposedly founded—for instance, divine law, or the principle of rationality, or of giving one’s life a beautiful form. The mode of subjection therefore forms a key part of the doctrine which, as I noted in my introduction, must underlie any system of discipline.

SELF-FORMING ACTIVITY (*pratique du soi*) or *ETHICAL WORK* (*travail éthique*), the practices subjects use to work on and improve the ethical substance—“not only in order to bring one’s conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behaviour”.²¹⁰ Foucault describes this as “*asceticism* in a very broad sense”,²¹¹ similar to the Ancient Greek *askesis*, often translated as ‘practice’. The *pratique du soi* constitutes the discipline (practice) necessitated by the *mode d’assujettissement*, the interpellation of the subject by the law or doctrine (theory).

TELOS (*téléologie*). The telos is another way of describing the type of selfhood to which an ethical subject aspires by behaving in a moral way—for instance, to be

²⁰⁸ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 352.

²⁰⁹ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 27.

²¹⁰ Foucault, 27.

²¹¹ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 355.

pure, immortal, free, master of oneself, etc. As Foucault puts it: “A moral action tends towards its own accomplishment; but it also aims beyond the latter, to the establishing of a moral conduct that commits an individual, not only to other actions always in conformity with values and rules, but to a certain mode of being, a mode of being characteristic of the ethical subjects.”²¹²

It is clear how flexible these tools are, how they can serve to analyse not only systems of sexual ethics but any ethical system in which an individual’s *rappor à soi* is particularly important. As I move towards the end of this project, I will use Foucault’s schematic to try to characterise an ‘ethics of writerly discipline’ as I have come to understand it through my analysis.

The *ETHICAL SUBSTANCE* implicated in discourses of writerly discipline is, as I have argued throughout this project, creativity. More specifically, the moral problem posed by creativity lies in its waywardness, its refusal to appear on demand or to limit itself to reasonable proportions: these are the reasons it requires moral action in the form of discipline. Here one might observe another overlap with Foucault’s account of the “libidinisation” of sexual desire, which appears in *Confessions of the Flesh* (2018), the posthumously published fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Here Foucault argues that Saint Augustine inaugurated a view of desire as something which, even within marriage, had the potential to be corrupted by libidinal forces. The problematic moment, in Augustine’s view, was when “the involuntary suddenly usurps the voluntary”—not only in the form of uncontrollable lust, but also as impotence.²¹³ Similarly, then, one might postulate a “libidinisation” of creativity as part of its problematisation: the way it is framed both as inconsistent, liable to fail to be present on demand, and as excessive, liable to exceed ‘necessity’ and tip into ‘redundancy’. The two strands of writerly discipline I identified in Chapter 1—supporting the production of writing through a routine, and the reduction of writing through editing—are thus each aimed at one problematic tendency of the ethical substance.

²¹² Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 28.

²¹³ Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh: The History of Sexuality Volume 4*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 2021), 259–62, 268–69.

The *MODE OF SUBJECTION* implied by discourses of writerly discipline, the way in which a writer recognises her obligation to practise discipline, is difficult to pin down. Certainly writerly discipline is not aimed at giving the writer's life a 'beautiful form', as Foucault argued for Greek and Roman sexual ethics; nor, equally, does it serve the beauty of the text the writer is producing, since aesthetic pleasure is not a particularly prominent part of the discourses I have been examining. Instead, writerly discipline takes its moral authority from another type of doctrine, one much closer to what Foucault describes in a 1983 interview as the concern for 'truth'. In this interview, given during one of Foucault's visits to Berkeley, the professors Paul Rabinow and Herbert Dreyfus suggest to Foucault that certain modern behaviours could be characterised as the 'aestheticisation' of one's own life: behaviours visible in "places like Berkeley where people think that everything from the way they eat breakfast, to the way they have sex, to the way they spend their day, should be perfected". Foucault objects, asserting that these behaviours are not truly creative or aesthetic because they have an underlying relationship to truth: "[I]n most of these cases, most of the people think if they do what they do, if they live as they live, the reason is that they know the *truth* about desire, life, nature, body, and so on."²¹⁴

Similarly, I would suggest that the doctrine underlying and necessitating discourses of writerly discipline is based not on aesthetic principles, but on a complex of 'truths' about creativity and its threats which make discipline necessary in the interests of productivity, 'hygiene', and selflessness. At the centre of this doctrinal complex is the double 'truth' I have identified, that creativity is necessary and mysterious but also unreliable and excessive, and so writing requires a kind of dialectical or ambivalently split practice which liberates, then restrains, then re-liberates, then re-restrains, the 'raw force' of creativity. Sometimes this duality, as I have noted, is figured in such familiar ways as childlike writer/adult editor, unconscious content-provider/conscious form-maker (pop-Freud), passion/will (Coleridge), or (to add another Romantic theorist) Schiller's sense-drive/form-drive. In addition, supporting each side of this duality are, I think, further assumed truths. On one side, guaranteeing the importance of raw creativity, is a certain 'personal truth' or authenticity which is supposed to be essential to writing and which certain forms of writerly discipline enable a writer to reach, often by creating space (as in the blank

²¹⁴ Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 350.

time periods of a routine), by trusting the unconscious process, and by using free writing to access one's deepest self. Metaphors of depth and flow are common here, like Yaa Gyasi's image of writing as digging a well and hoping for the "gush of water". On the other side, the 'true' form of the work does not arise directly from access to one's deep self, but must be discovered consciously using an editing process of rigorous testing and rejecting. This is often described using the semantics of necessity, the idea that some words are probably 'redundant', or, in Alice Underwood's words, that "the dignity of writing is [...] due to slashing what you want to say down to what you *need* to say". The selfishness supposedly inherent in the desire to nourish, not kill, one's 'darlings' suggests that the reader might be somehow injured (even if only by being bored) by a text which exceeds this 'true', necessary form, and that this consideration must trump the writer's own preferences and attachments. These multiple and overlapping 'truths' thus constitute a possible version of the contemporary Anglo-American doctrine or ideology of creativity, and a writer interpellated by this ideology and its supporting institutions recognises herself not only as *pragmatically* obliged to practise discipline to access true creativity, but *morally* obliged to do so.

The *SELF-FORMING ACTIVITY*, the *ETHICAL WORK* of writerly discipline, consists of those practices I analysed in Chapter 1 and grouped into two types. Each type, as I argued, addresses one of the problematic 'truths' of creativity: productive practices are supposed to create (mental, physical, temporal) space for creativity to emerge, and reductive practices are supposed to enable (quantitative, stylistic) moderation, to prevent creativity taking its natural course and overspilling the bounds of decency. Since, as I argued, these founding truths exist in a kind of mutual dialectic, or perhaps an irreconcilable ambivalence, so too do the practices, which explains the exceptionalism visible in many writers' accounts and advice about writerly discipline. Hilary Mantel makes this dialectic or ambivalence somewhat visible: she admits she works many more hours than she is "on-song", and that she sometimes wonders why, since "[w]riting's not an industrial process"; but at the same time she praises the "hard labour" of conciseness; and also insists that "[a] great deal happens in the dark, as it were; work goes on half-consciously. You have to trust this process is happening."²¹⁵

²¹⁵ Hilary Mantel, "Hilary Mantel on How Writers Learn to Trust Themselves," Literary Hub, October 27, 2020, <https://lithub.com/hilary-mantel-on-how-writers-learn-to-trust-themselves/>.

Thus her account ensures that neither the “half-conscious” nor “hard labour” model of writing is allowed to triumph, and that each ‘truth’ of creativity is served in turn. Apparent lapses of discipline, in this view, can be recuperated into this dialectic which is supposed to ensure continued access to the primary ‘truth’ of creativity: Roddy Doyle’s “mitching”, and Henry Miller’s “Keep human!”, for instance, ensure the writing process does not become robotic, clinical or methodical, that it retains an element of irregularity or mystery. On the other hand, these lapses lay a writer perpetually open to accusations of indiscipline if these moments of exceptionality are perceived to be too frequent or extreme: the judgement anticipated by Susan Hill when she muses, “Can I be a serious writer, keeping such casual hours?”

A Foucauldian model also makes clear that the discourses of writerly discipline I have been analysing should be seen as a *part* of the ethical work of writerly discipline, not simply a series of descriptions of it. As Foucault explains in *The Use of Pleasure* (and reiterates in *The Care of the Self*), the setting up of a “hermeneutics of the self” was a part of the Greek and Roman self-forming activities he describes, and enabled “a decipherment as painstaking, continuous, and detailed as possible, of the movements of desire in all its hidden forms”.²¹⁶ The self-decipherment writers may do in order to determine their own practices of discipline is therefore central to the ethics of creative writing, and is a key practice in itself. Moreover, writing about and recommending writerly discipline, especially to a public readership or audience, includes a performative element which suggests that, in addition to whatever self-examination writers may do alone, the reporting of this to others is a further form of self-forming activity which consolidates and disseminates the doctrine on which their discipline is based; even simply reading about other writers’ routines, one might speculate, is a form of ethical practice which ‘works on’ the way a writer relates to her own creativity.

The *TELOS* of writerly discipline—what kind of person writers are trying to be when they discipline their creativity—is to some extent tautologous. Discipline, as I said in my introduction, is autotelic, though contradictorily so: one practises discipline to become disciplined, but also to moderate one’s own discipline. Additionally, though, discipline is a means to other ends, and writers practise discipline for reasons beyond the improvement of their own characters. What these reasons might be is not

²¹⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 6, 27.

entirely obvious. Clearly neither maximum self-expression nor maximum self-mastery is a telos on its own, as these would not explain the dialectical or ambivalent disciplinary practices required to serve the ‘truths’ of creativity; nor is self-knowledge the final aim, since this is only pragmatically necessary in order to design a practice of discipline which is morally effective. It is worth noting that discourses of writerly discipline often seem to assume that writers intend to publish their work, and to anticipate this work being met by readers who will be able to perceive indiscipline in it. Practising discipline, therefore, becomes a way to ensure one’s texts remain marketable, communicable products which are both attractively ‘efficient’ and reassuringly ‘human’, rather than either huge tomes of free-flowing, barely edited prose or elliptical, perfunctory, ‘slight’ novellas. One telos of writerly discipline might therefore be strategically to position the writer as a sociable, communicative subject, rather than one unproductively concerned with her own private (even masturbatory) pleasures and never intending to submit them to the judgement of readers. I have suggested in both my previous chapters that writerly discipline provides a way of positioning the writer recognisably within the dynamics of late capitalism. Whereas, for a theorist of Marxist aesthetics like Sianne Ngai, the aesthetic category of ‘zaniness’ adds a performance of devotion to otherwise alienated labour, practices of writerly discipline are perhaps exhorted for converse reasons, to add a performance of labour and self-alienation to an otherwise *too*-beloved activity.²¹⁷

Foucault would, of course, have been wary of attributing all these ethical relations to the overarching ‘cause’ of capitalism, or of suggesting too totalising an account of how particular ‘micro-physics’ of power arise and are sustained. I am similarly wary: the assumption that all forms of creative discipline serve the recuperation of art into capitalist value-systems is both simplistic and defeatist. In fact, just as I read these discourses as a psychoanalytic defence formation in my previous chapter, it is equally possible to read them as a collective political strategy which, rather than narrowly confining writers within capitalist structures—or as well as this—helps writers to navigate the exigencies of capitalism for their own survival. While these discourses appear to restrict writing within very narrow bounds, they also create a space in which an entirely ‘unnecessary’ and often unprofitable practice is able to

²¹⁷ See Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 197ff.

continue. To assess how far this strategising is successful, it might be worth examining, for instance, how much slippage exists between the forms of discipline recommended by public discourses and writers' actual practice of these forms. And if—as the accounts of Anne Enright and Jon McGregor, amongst others, might suggest—the regular failure of writerly discipline is something of an open secret, this might interestingly complicate the role these discourses play in negotiating between personal creative ambition and cultural expectation.

*

I have demonstrated the fertility of Foucault's work for analysing writerly discipline; one more possible analogy remains, however, which necessitates a return to one of *discipline's* other meanings: that of an academic field of study, along with its particular instruments, methodologies, and principles. Foucault's interest in structures of 'power-knowledge' led him, five years before *Discipline and Punish* was published, to give the lecture at the Collège de France from which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, 'The Order of Discourse'. In this lecture Foucault considers the various constraints which govern the production of discourse. He speaks briefly of "systems of exclusion" ("forbidden speech, the division of madness and the will to truth"), then turns to what he calls "internal procedures" of discourse, those which classify, shape, and order it. He divides this second category into "commentary", "author", and, most significantly for this project, "disciplines";²¹⁸ these principles all limit, as James Chandler summarises, "the chance element in discourse", gaining authority by their consistency and rarefaction of what can be said.²¹⁹

Foucault contrasts the author-function to disciplines in terms of their relationship to particular individuals. Whereas the author-function operates "by the play of an identity which has the form of individuality and the self",²²⁰ depending on an at least notional person as a unified point of origin, a discipline, conversely, is characterised by anonymity: it is

²¹⁸ Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 52–61.

²¹⁹ James Chandler, "Foucault and Disciplinary Authority," in *Authority Matters: Rethinking the Theory and Practice of Authorship*, ed. Stephen Donovan, Danuta Zadworna-Fjellestad, and Rolf Lundén (Amsterdam: Brill | Rodopi, 2008), 61.

²²⁰ Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," 59.

defined by a domain of objects, a set of methods, a corpus of propositions considered to be true, a play of rules and definitions, of techniques and instruments: all this constitutes a sort of anonymous system at the disposal of anyone who wants to or is able to use it [...] [I]n a discipline, unlike a commentary, what is supposed at the outset is [...] the requisites for the construction of new statements.²²¹

Such new statements, Foucault adds, are recognised as ‘disciplinary’ not according to whether or not they are literally ‘true’, but according to whether they are “in the true” (*dans le vrai*) of the discipline—that is, whether they conform to its existing conditions and rules.²²² Discursive statements accepted as disciplinary therefore take the form of a “permanent re-actuation of the rules”: disciplines are circular in ensuring their own maintenance.²²³

Much work has been done since Foucault’s lecture on what disciplines and disciplinary authority are, and the implications of this for questions of academic freedom, as well as for what kinds of interdisciplinary work can be done.²²⁴ However, I would like to remain with the question of how Foucault’s distinctions contribute to an analysis of writerly discipline. My suggestion is that the discourses I have been examining, forming as they do a kind of coherent corpus binding creativity and discipline together in a dialectic-style doctrine, sometimes masquerade as ‘author’-type statements, but actually sit within the category of the ‘disciplinary’. That is, what seems like the advice of “sage amateurs”,²²⁵ the testimony of enlightened beings who

²²¹ Foucault, 59.

²²² Foucault, 60.

²²³ Foucault, 61.

²²⁴ See, for instance, Stanley Fish, “Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard To Do,” *Profession*, 1989, 15–22; Lynn Hunt, “The Virtues of Disciplinarity,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28, no. 1 (1994): 1–7; W.J.T. Mitchell, “Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture,” *Art Bulletin* 77, no. 4 (1995): 540–44; W.J.T. Mitchell, “Art, Fate, and the Disciplines: Some Indicators,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 1023–31; Judith Butler, “Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 773–95.

²²⁵ This phrase was coined by Robert Post, who in his essay ‘Debating Disciplinarity’ (in *Critical Inquiry*’s special 2009 issue ‘The Fate of the Disciplines’) distinguishes between two forms of authority: disciplinary authority—solid, expert and reliably productive of knowledge, if not always very exciting; and charismatic authority—artistic, unpredictable, and subversive, if not always very disciplined. Post links charismatic authority to W.J.T. Mitchell’s idea of the potential for “indiscipline” at the margins of disciplines, places where ruptures and breakages can occur. Mitchell is excited by these possibilities; for Post, however, justifying the humanities’ existence on the basis of their disciplinary (expert) authority is necessary to preserve academic freedom. Advocating a less professionalised version of disciplinary authority, Post warns, where scholars are charismatic “sage amateurs, to the extent that they do not purport to be communicating expert knowledge but only the views of alert citizens”, risks laying humanities institutions open to accusations of indoctrination by biased non-professionals or non-

have successfully navigated the mysteries of creativity, is in fact consistent across multiple individuals and periods to the point where it forms the kind of anonymous system Foucault defines as a discipline. Thus, one can read an article about writerly discipline without knowing if the author is talented or successful, and still judge the article's content as valid by whether it is "in the true" of the informal discipline of creative writing (as distinct from the university discipline of Creative Writing). Hilary Mantel's discussion of finding two "golden hours" a day, for instance, if published anonymously, would still carry the disciplinary authority of creative writing (though would lose the authority of the author-function) because it is consistent with a large corpus of discourses, without a single inventor, which continually reinscribes the 'truths' of creativity and the moral necessity of disciplining it.

Understanding discourses of writerly discipline as part of a broader 'discipline' founded on certain 'truths' of creativity enables further critique of this whole network of power-relations, rather than just the 'discipline' component. Foucault suggests that it is important to ask of these networks "what proportion of nonconsensuality is implied in [a given] power relation, and whether that degree of nonconsensuality is necessary or not".²²⁶ In the context of writerly discipline, one could further investigate how discourses of writerly discipline inform the nonconsensual subjections and exclusions produced by such power formations as creative writing pedagogy, success criteria on the part of agents, publishers and booksellers, and canon formation—that is, how far certain types of writers who do not present as recognisably 'disciplined' are being excluded from centres of literary culture, and how far these exclusions are being disguised as purely aesthetic judgments. Happily, developments in creative writing pedagogy have already begun to address this question, by critiquing the limited concept of 'craft' and its ideological underpinnings,²²⁷ and schemes for helping writers from underrepresented groups (writers of colour, working class writers, LGBTQ writers)

experts. See Robert Post, "Debating Disciplinarity," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 760–61, 766; Mitchell, "Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture," 541.

²²⁶ Michel Foucault et al., "Politics and Ethics: An Interview," in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Catherine Porter (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 379.

²²⁷ See, for instance, Marshall Moore and Sam Meekings, eds., *The Place and the Writer: International Intersections of Teacher Lore and Creative Writing Pedagogy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Matthew Salesses, *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping* (New York, NY: Catapult, 2021); plus the sources I cited in my discussion of craft in Chapter 1.

into print have become increasingly numerous and active.²²⁸ In order to detach from the narrow imperatives of writerly discipline, however, it may be necessary to go further. Since the doctrine on which these practices of discipline are founded holds that creativity is inevitably in need of discipline, it is worth considering whether a total abandonment of the concept of creativity as an innate force in need of management may serve us better. It might be possible to venture ‘out of the true’ of the discipline of creative writing, complete with its creativity/discipline dialectic, and explore what Foucault calls the “whole teratology of knowledge beyond its margins”²²⁹—that is, the ‘monstrous’ ideas which the formation of a discipline necessarily excludes. How this might be done is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this project. However, it seems to me likely that while Anglo-American literary culture remains dependent on a theory of innate personal creativity as a “libidinised” instinctual urge to self-expression which always falls short of and/or exceeds what is required of it, then writers remain beholden to a cultural-ethical system which both constructs their creativity as something already theorised, already ‘known’ by discourse, and insists that they discipline this creativity according to recognised principles. Just as Foucault began to advocate alternative models of sexuality in the last years of his life, suggesting that the very concept of ‘desire’ as the ground of sexual practices must be abandoned,²³⁰ perhaps we should work towards a theory of creative writing in which creativity no longer originates as a ‘raw’ force within the individual, in order to create space for new models of writerly discipline.

²²⁸ The writer Amita Parikh has collected and listed many opportunities for underrepresented writers on her website. See Amita Parikh, “Opportunities for Underrepresented Writers,” Amita Parikh, accessed March 8, 2022, <https://www.amitaparikh.com/opportunities-for-underrepresented-writers>.

²²⁹ Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” 60.

²³⁰ See, for instance, an interview conducted with Foucault in 1982 and published in 1984 as ‘Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity’. Here Foucault suggests that the development of sexual theories in the last few centuries have emphasised the need to “liberate” desire, which he emphatically opposes: “No!” he insists. “We have to create new pleasure. And then maybe desire will follow.” See Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and Others (New York, NY: The New Press, 1997), 166.

Conclusion

This critical project has identified and explored some of the key premises on which discourses of writerly discipline depend. Most significantly, these discourses position writerly discipline in a close relation with an innate personal creativity which is assumed to be both unreliable and excessive. In discussing how to manage this problematic creativity, these discourses also employ a subtly moralising language, blurring aesthetic and moral values to suggest that writerly discipline is a duty as well as a technique, an ethos as well as a method. Furthermore, these discourses often depend on shifting and repeated gestures of demystification and remystification, which strategically maintain both creativity and the process of creative writing as both a simple matter of discipline and also ultimately mysterious and ineffable.

As I have shown, Freud's work, although it participates in this demystifying-remystifying trend, is nevertheless helpful in offering ways of reading the contemporary fascination with writerly discipline as a collective defence formation to deal with our mutually contradictory desires both to explain creativity and to ensure it is never fully explained. Foucault, meanwhile, provides particularly helpful models for reading patterns of demystification and remystification as analogous to those in discourses around modern sexuality, and prompts the suggestion that creativity and writerly (and artistic) discipline may be mutually constitutive, impossible to separate. The complex of unofficial but influential theorising around creativity and discipline may thus have taken on the force of an academic discipline, being broadly accepted as 'true', and difficult to radically alter without straying into the realm of the 'monstrous'.

I have not, despite my unease with the underlying ideologies of writerly discipline, written this project in order to propose a total abandonment of practices of discipline, or indeed of discipline's moral valorisation. As I made clear in my introduction, discipline is an ideologically flexible concept, available to serve and enhance almost any set of personal or political aims, despite its modern associations with the 'Protestant ethic' of capitalism and the total surveillance of Foucauldian institutions. Even a consciously progressive ideology such as 'pleasure activism', as described by adrienne maree brown, is compatible with "precision, rigour, and discipline" in its search for "what brings aliveness into our systems" and access to

“personal, relational and communal power”.²³¹ Therefore, although discipline’s blankness means we must sometimes work hard to unpick the ideologies lurking under recommendations of particular forms of discipline, it also leaves discipline itself available as a powerful tool, and a political necessity.

This project is instead intended to enhance our available critical tools for analysing forms of discipline and understanding them as always rooted in an underlying ideological or doctrinal ground. There are, of course, alternative ways of thinking about creative writing that do not particularly depend on a deep conservatism about what ‘good’ writers and writing should be like, or on a (weakly theorised) idea of innate personal creativity as both unreliable and excessive. Lydia Davis’s essay ‘Thirty Recommendations for Good Writing Habits’ (2013), for example, gives some sense of this possible range: although two of her recommendations (predictably) recommend cutting words to achieve stylistic economy, many others are focused on cultivating curiosity, taking detailed notes about new subjects, and developing empathy and concentration.²³² This essay is, I think, diametrically opposed to a book like Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way*: far from recommending a journey deeper into the self, a search for one’s personal creativity that risks becoming solipsistic, Davis suggests a deliberate, committed journey outwards into the world. This kind of approach could, in its sidelining of the various ‘truths’ of creativity I sketched in my last chapter, form a potential basis for other ways of thinking about discipline in creative writing—and, indeed, for an ethics of living.

Within literary and cultural studies, this project might prompt other numerous directions for further research, including:

- ◆ an examination, as I suggested in my last chapter, of the real-life slippage between descriptions of disciplined writing practices and writers’ actual behaviours, to see if this constitutes a strategic space for operating an unofficial ‘indiscipline’ alongside public advocations of writerly discipline;
- ◆ an exploration of forms of pleasure in writing practices (rather than an assumed pre-existing desire and its fulfilment) which takes account of

²³¹ adrienne maree brown, Introduction to *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, ed. adrienne maree brown (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2019), 6–7.

²³² Lydia Davis, *Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), 226–62.

Foucault's late discussions of BDSM cultures and the transformation of the erotic;

- ◆ further critique and transformation of the 'discipline and craft' model inherent in so much creative writing pedagogy—a movement which, as I noted in my last chapter, has already begun;
- ◆ a consideration of the novella as an especially live literary form in discussions of writerly and literary discipline, since it is so often supposed to 'achieve' just as 'much' as a novel, but without the attendant 'bagginess' or 'self-indulgence';
- ◆ and perhaps further work to deconstruct the concept of innate personal creativity, prompted by concern about its recursiveness and repeated mystifications which often serve more as a ground for moral judgments of writers' habits of 'creativity management' than as a premise for genuine exploration and praxis.

Discipline's intensely holographic quality—the way that from different angles it can look artistically and politically transformative, or damagingly oppressive—means that identifying and executing useful interventions requires a keen eye and close attention to how particular practices of discipline are justified. Strategies for avoiding harmful versions of discipline need not, I think, involve replacing all systems of discipline with total indiscipline, or abandoning all limitations on freedom, comfort and self-expression, but must commit to looking beyond discipline's forms to the doctrines on which they are based. In the case of writerly discipline, finding more productive ways to conceptualise writing may require a deliberate bracketing-off of the prolific and pervasive discourses which make such narrow assumptions about how creative writing should be practised. As Davis's essay shows, both helpful and unhelpful ideas may be juxtaposed even within the same text, and require careful attention to distinguish: making sure the right darlings are murdered, as it were, must be a discipline in itself. On the other hand, whether as a campaign to save the adverb or a more serious project to expand our sense of what kinds of writing are acceptable, this form of discipline will surely be worthwhile.

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